THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN'S MAGAZINE

JUNE 1989
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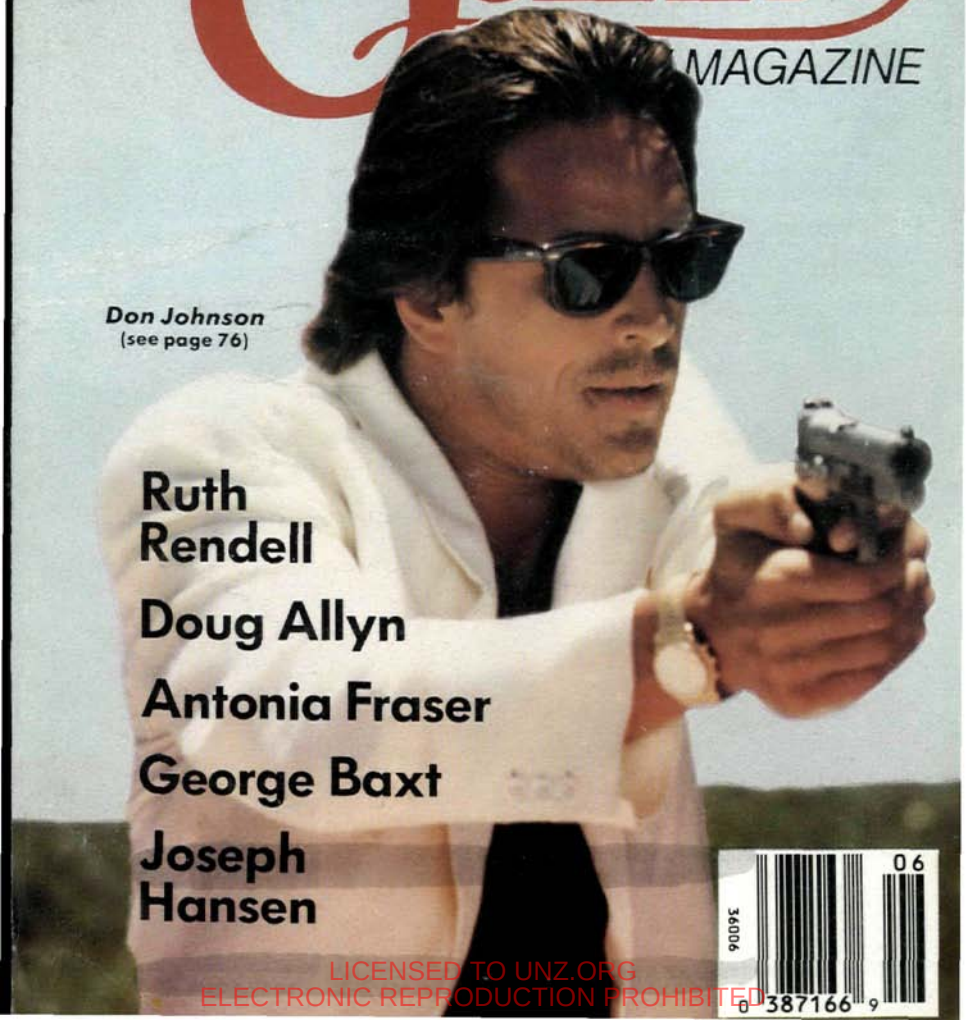

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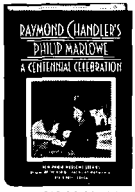

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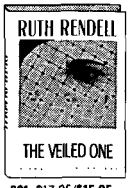

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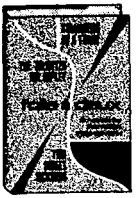

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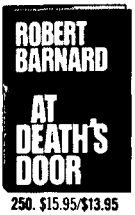

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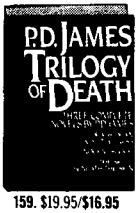

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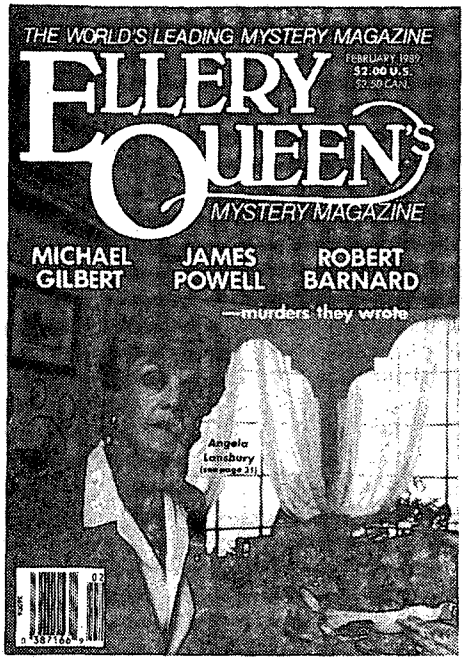

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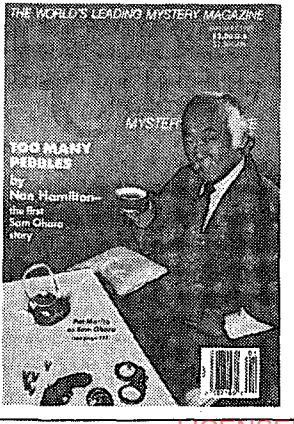

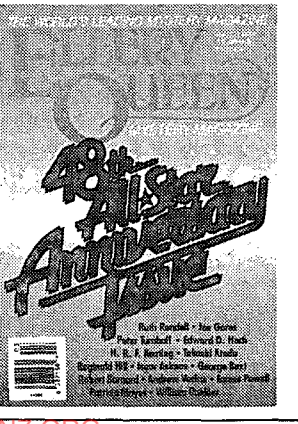

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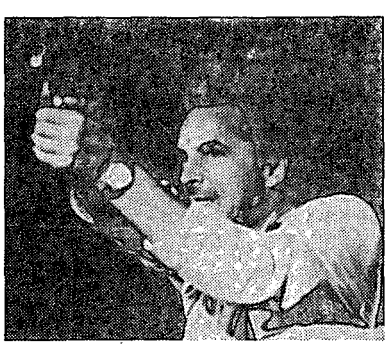
Contents

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN®

The Last Reunion	Doug Allyn	**4**
The Copper Peacock	Ruth Rendell	**32**
The Burying of Treasure	George Baxt	**47**
I Saw Robert Johnson	James Sallis	**56**
Headwaiter	Chester Himes	**60**
The Jury Box	Jon L. Breen	**77**
The Gypsy and the Pilgrims	Edward D. Hoch	**80**
The Greenhouse Dogs	James Powell	**94**
Duffle Bag	J. V. Freitas	**106**
The Blude-Red Wine	Antonia Fraser	**113**
Molly's Aim	Joseph Hansen	**126**



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a *NEW* short story by

DOUG ALLYN

A dozen or so passengers were climbing out of the van, and several of them wandered over. The woman in the lead, the size of a beached whale with a cherub's face perched atop? Peach Conover, the prom queen? Captain of the cheerleaders? My God, it was.

"Hello, Bobby," she said coolly. "I see you've grown up a lot. Lanny," she said to her husband, "get up off the ground, what'll people think?"

"Who cares, hon?" Lanny said affably. "Anybody who gets on my case gets his taxes doubled. Now be a good girl and get me a refill. Got a dead sojer here." He crumpled the empty beer can in his fist and tossed it at her. She caught it with practiced ease, shook her head, and waddled off, taking one of Bobby Cruz's high-school fantasies with her . . .

THE LAST REUNION

by DOUG ALLYN

The setting sun flickered through the aspen leaves, chasing shadows across the Mustang's windshield as I cruised south into the Paradise Hills. The gas stations had all been modernized and there were a few new homes, but for the most part the countryside had changed very little in the past twenty years. I'd always assumed my memories of my old Kentucky home were romanticized, touched up by time, but, if anything, the hills were even lovelier than I remembered. Speed control set at 60, Gordon Lightfoot murmuring on the tape deck, two-lane blacktop unwinding ahead of me like a dark ribbon. Heaven. Until I gradually realized I was checking the rearview mirror too often, and scanning the hills ahead for—damned if

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I knew. Something. Just nerves, I suppose. But there was no reason for it. I was coming home. Sort of.

It was almost nine when I crested the hill that overlooks Lincolnsburg. I pulled off on the shoulder of the road and climbed out. The town looked like a Norman Rockwell postcard, a country village hugging the banks of the Liege River in the dusky valley below, streetlights winking on, forming golden pools of light along Main Street. I swallowed hard, forcing down a surge of emotion that took me unaware. For a moment I considered leaving the car where it was and walking the last few miles into town, as I'd done many times when I was a boy. But I didn't. After a bit, I climbed back into the car, but instead of heading down into the valley I took the first right turn, on Spruce Road. My invitation mentioned a pre-reunion barbecue at Jumbo Haas's farm. I was curious about the town, of course, but even more curious about the people.

The farm was smaller than I expected. I remembered towering stone gateposts and a white clapboard house the size of Tara in *Gone with the Wind.* The gateposts were still there, all of seven feet tall, sentinels guarding a gravel drive barely wide enough for my car. The house? An ordinary two-story farmhouse, showing its age. A bonfire was burning in the back yard, ringed by a dozen or so people standing in small groups or lounging on lawn chairs. Shadowed faces glanced at the Mustang curiously as I crept past, and again I felt the twinge of unease I'd noticed in the hills. I parked in the lee of the huge, sagging barn, and strolled toward the fire. And didn't recognize a soul.

At least, not at first. As I drew closer, a face or two aligned with the images I'd carried in my memory for the past twenty years. Jumbo Haas, heavier now, nearly bald, his pudgy moon-face resembling his father's more than the boy I'd played football with. Lisa Friedrich, a towering, big-shouldered blonde, her hair done in braids like a Valkyrie. Leo Colter, harder-looking than I remembered, in some kind of uniform. Local cop? A few other faces looked vaguely familiar, but none of them the friends I'd hoped to see. And no Rose.

Jumbo came stomping over, his face split in a gap-toothed, jack-o'-lantern grin. "Jeezuz, look who made it. Bobby Cruz, alive and kickin'. Hell, I thought you bought it in Nam."

"Not quite," I said, grimacing as he ground my hand to a pulp. "How are you, Jumbo?"

"About half blasted, which is the right way to be at a party. Come

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on, lemme get you a brew." I couldn't have said no if I'd wanted to. He draped an arm over my neck and dragged me toward the fire. "Hey, gang, look who we got. Bobby Cruz, back from the grave or somewheres."

There were a few cautious hellos, but they were drowned out by the roar of a customized van charging up the drive toward the fire, swerving aside at the last minute, spraying everyone with dust. It jerked to a halt and the driver clambered out and cut loose with a rebel yell. "Yeeaaww! Make way, make way—hizzoner the mayor's here with beer and good cheer!" He staggered unsteadily toward the fire, spotted me, and stopped, staring. Then he charged headlong at me and leapt, arms outspread. Jumbo dropped his beer and made a grab for him in midair, but it was too late. The three of us went down in a heap on the lawn.

"Lanny, you moron! You're gettin' beer all over us!" Jumbo yelled.

I was struggling to breathe. Lanny Bradley had a headlock on me and was clinging for dear life. "Bobbeee!" he whooped in my ear, planting a beery kiss on my cheek. "Bobby, Bobby, Bobby!"

I managed to pry his arm from around my throat and leaned back on my elbows, trying to catch my breath. Jumbo sat up, hauling Lanny partially upright. Lanny handed me his beer, grinning like an idiot. I accepted and took a deep pull, feeling the icy brew drown my uneasiness. Home. Maybe you really can go home again. Lanny's face was a little thinner than I recalled, and his temples had silvered, but he obviously hadn't changed a whit.

"Damnit, Bobby," he said, "you coulda told a person you were comin'. I'da hired a band."

"You did hire a band," Jumbo said.

"I don't mean for the dance, dumbshit," Lanny said, "I woulda hired one to stand in the middle of the damn road and—hey, Peach! Peachy honey, look who's here!"

A dozen or so passengers were climbing out of the van, and several of them wandered over. The woman in the lead, the size of a beached whale with a cherub's face perched atop? Peach Conover, the prom queen? Captain of the cheerleaders? My God, it was.

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head, and waddled off, taking one of my high-school fantasies with her.

"Great little woman," Lanny said. "Well, not as little as she useta be. Still got dynamite bazooms, though. How about you, Bobby, you married?"

"I was," I said, "it didn't work out."

"Good." Lanny nodded. "That means you're here alone, right? Which means you're stayin' with us."

"I really don't—"

"No arguments," Lanny insisted, "or I'll knock your butt down again. Now gimme a hand up—we'll get some beer and do some catchin' up."

"I'd like that," I said evenly. "We've got a few things to straighten out, you and me."

"We will, but first we need more beer. Man's gotta keep his priorities straight if he wants to get on in life."

Jumbo and I helped Lanny up and the three of us made our way over to the fire. Lanny grabbed a couple of beers from an ice chest, shoved one in my hand, then wandered off, gladhanding his way through the crowd. I started after him, but Leo Colter casually blocked my path. He'd fleshed out a bit, but still looked in good shape. His sandy hair was even shorter than mine, close as a skullcap. His uniform was standard county-mountie tan, his eyes grey, watery, and wary.

"Hello, Cruz," he said. "Surprised to see you here."

"I've got an invitation, Leo," I said. "Want to check it?"

"I'll take your word for it. I'm just surprised you came is all. I thought reunions were usually for graduates."

"I did graduate," I said. "It just took me a little longer. I even went to college."

"Where? In prison?"

"I didn't go to prison, Leo. The judge gave me a choice of jail or the Marines. I chose the Corps. How about you?"

"Army," he said, "then home. I'm county sheriff here now. What are you doin' these days, Cruz?"

"Funny, that sounds like an official question, Leo, and I'm not sure I like it."

"I don't much care whether you do or not. Lincolnsburg's a nice town, Cruz, and I try to keep it that way. Last I heard you got busted for dope down in Lauderdale durin' Easter break senior year. And since we don't have any dope problems around here, I'm just natu-

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rally curious about you. You say you went into the Marines? Then what?"

"Then nothing." I sighed. "I'm still in the Corps, Leo, an officer and a gentleman. Any problem with that?"

"Nope," he said evenly, "not if it's true. 'Scuse me, I've got to make a few calls." He swaggered off to the unmarked car parked with the others near the barn. I watched him go, swallowing my anger, then shrugged. I'd been half expecting something like this. If Leo's guff was all the static I got I'd—

"Hi, remember me?"

It took me a moment to match the striking, dark-haired woman with the pigtailed, four-eyed bookworm I'd known in high school. "Julie," I said. "Julie Cohen. I'll be damned. You've grown up."

"Which is more than some people can say," she smiled, as Lanny cut loose with a rebel yell. "And my name's Goodman now."

"Goodman?"

"Sam Goodman. No one you knew. We got married in college. He, ah, didn't come home from Viet Nam."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Really. How's your dad? Still running the *Herald?*"

"He retired last year, theoretically, but he still does the editorials, and stops by a few times a week to schmooze and complain that I'm running the paper into the ground. Hasn't changed a bit, in other words. How about you, Bobby?"

"Excuse me for butting in, Julie, but Mr. Cruz and I have some business to attend to." Barb McSorley, class secretary and general busybody, had bustled up, notebook in hand. She was stouter than I recalled, though she'd never been svelte, and with her rainbow-hued shift, tightly permed grey hair, and bifocals, she looked like someone's grandmother. "I ordered a few extra places from the caterers for last-minute arrivals, so food's no problem, but I'll need the twenty-five dollars in advance if you don't mind—"

"Didn't you get my check? I sent it with the confirmation."

"Confirmation?" Barb frowned suspiciously.

"The card that came with the invitation. I mailed it to you in care of the high school."

"Cruz, Lincolnsburg hasn't had a high school since the old school burned back in 'seventy and they consolidated us with Pike County. And I didn't send you an invitation. I had no idea how to contact you even if I'd wanted to."

"Rose apparently tracked me down," I said, fishing the envelope

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out of my jacket pocket and handing it to Barb. "This caught up with me overseas six weeks ago."

"Rose?" Barb said, scowling at the invitation. "What do—" Her voice trailed off and she swallowed. "Is this your idea of a joke?" she said, glaring up at me.

"What's wrong?" Julie said.

"His so-called invitation is signed by Rose Gilliland," Barb said, passing it to Julie. "It even says 'look forward to seeing you again.' "

"So what's the problem?" I said.

"You know damned well," Barb snapped, "and you're no funnier now than you were in high school, Cruz. Now do you have the twenty-five bucks or not?"

"Of course," I said, fumbling two tens and a five out of my wallet, "but I don't see—"

"Thank you so much," Barb said acidly, snatching the money out of my hand and stalking off toward the fire.

"What the hell was that all about?" I said, staring after her.

"My God," Julie said softly, "you really don't know, do you?"

"Know what? What's with Barb and Rose?"

"Bobby, Rose is—missing. Probably dead. She, ah—her car, the red Corvette? She ran it off one of the curves in Paradise Hills the night before graduation. It blew up and burned."

"Missing," I echoed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"They never found her body," Julie said. "She just vanished. Her father went half out of his mind, had the state police and the National Guard out looking for her, the F.B.I. Nothing. No trace. Not in twenty years."

"Then what the hell is this?" I said, waving the invitation at her.

"Another prank, I suppose. There've been a lot of them over the years. Fires in the hills near where her car burned. Bouquets of roses delivered when someone dies. No card, just the roses. Her car—or, rather, one like it—screaming through the hills at night the way she used to drive. I can't believe no one told you."

"Lady, I haven't heard from anybody in this town since I got busted down in Lauderdale all those years ago. For pot that wasn't mine, I might add. I went in the Marines, then to Nam, and got banged up. I wrote to a few friends from the hospital at Quantico, but nobody bothered to write back. Funny, you grow up in a place, you think you know people, and— Anyway, my folks moved south shortly after that, and I just never came back here."

"Until now."

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"No one bothered to invite me until now," I said evenly. "And even that turns out to be a not-so-practical joke."

"I'm sorry," Julie said. "If I'd known—"

"Look!" somebody shouted. "Up in the hills!"

Across the valley, in the rolling darkness of Paradise Hills, a fire had flared up like a beacon, flames leaping and roiling into the night sky. The group around the bonfire watched silently, and I watched them, my classmates—faces from a past I'd tried to ignore, but couldn't forget. Jumbo, Peach and Lanny, Lisa, and even Leo and Barb. Not friends, certainly, or even people I had much in common with any more. Still, good people for the most part, with a shared history. My people, whether I liked it or not. And they were afraid. I could see it in their faces as they watched the fire flicker out across the valley as suddenly as it had erupted.

"Show's over," Lanny said with a taut grin. "At least for tonight. On with the party."

And we tried. Jumbo brought out his son's boombox and we drank beer and sang along with the Beatles and Porter Wagoner. But I noticed no one joked about the fire in the hills, or strayed very far from our own little circle of light. And within the hour, the party broke up, couples drifting away by twos and threes until even Lanny'd had enough.

I followed him home, a roundabout route as he dropped off some of the people he'd brought.

His home was larger than I expected, a split-level ranch-style set off by itself in a new subdivision west of Paradise Hills. I could hear Lanny and Peach arguing as I retrieved my suitcase from the Mustang's trunk, and she was stumping angrily into the house as I walked up.

"Look, if I'm putting you out—" I began.

"No, no, nothing like that. Peachy just thinks it's time for bed, but we know better, right? Come on around back on the deck, we'll shoot somethin'."

"Shoot something?" I said. "It's a bit late for that, isn't it?"

"Barely eleven," Lanny said, leading me around the three-car garage to an elaborate, elevated redwood deck at the rear of the house. He hit a switch and a yard the size of a football field blazed with light—a swimming pool, a putting green, a manicured lawn beyond them that stretched away into the darkness. Lanny fetched two bottles of Molson's dark from a well stocked cooler/bar built into

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the rear wall of the house and handed one to me. Then he opened a cabinet door beside the bar, revealing a half dozen shotguns, mostly Belgian Browning over-and-unders, with a matched pair of Parker doubles. "Pick your piece," Lanny said, "and we'll pop a couple plates. I got an automatic trap under the deck can throw the suckers a hundred yards."

"I don't think so," I said slowly. "I think I might be more inclined to shoot you, Lanny."

"Nah, you don't really wanna do that," he said, unperturbed, grabbing a handful of shells from an open box and taking one of the Parkers from the rack. He loaded the weapon, stepped up to the deck rail, and stomped a metal plunger with his foot. There was a hum beneath our feet, a quick *kerchunk*, and a fluorescent yellow-clay pigeon arced into the night sky from the shadows below the deck. Lanny led it expertly with the Parker, and fired. The pigeon disintegrated into a puff of yellow dust. He hit the plunger again, fired, powdered a second pigeon, then reloaded the Parker and held it out to me. "You want to shoot me, go ahead," he said, "but maybe you oughta hear me out first."

I stared at him for what seemed like an hour, trying to summon up some of the bitterness I'd felt all those months in the hospital in Virginia. But it wouldn't come. It had been too long ago. Or maybe he still looked too much like the boy I'd known. "I'll listen," I said at last. "I can always shoot you later."

"Fair enough," he nodded. "Truth time. Straight out. It was my fault you got busted down in Lauderdale."

"I figured that," I said. "You were the only one who smoked weed back then. And I can understand you panicking when the cops stopped us and letting me take the fall. What I don't understand is why you ran out on me afterward. I needed help and you let me down. We were supposed to be friends."

"We were friends," he said quietly, "but we weren't family."

"What's that mean?"

"Bobby, Bobby, you don't understand squat about squat even now. I didn't run out on you because I panicked. I did it because it was part of the deal."

"What deal? What are you talking about?"

"The whole thing was arranged," Lanny sighed, avoiding my eyes. "The weed, the bust, everything."

"Arranged?" I echoed stupidly.

"That's right. The week before we left, old man Gilliland called

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me into the bank and explained the facts of life to me, about mortgages, and notes, and leases, and how he held paper on my parents' home, my dad's store, my uncle's farm, everything. He's quite a character, old Alec Gilliland. Scared the hell out of me then, and still does. The bottom line was that you were a nice guy, Bobby, football hero and all that, but he didn't want Rose marrying a Mexican, any Mexican. He wanted you out of the picture."

"My God," I breathed, stunned. "And so you—set me up?"

"That's right. I'm not proud of it, but, hell, I did what I thought I had to under the circumstances. What would you have done?"

"I don't know," I said, trying to absorb what he'd said, to make sense of—everything my life had been. "But it wasn't necessary," I managed at last. "Rose and I weren't that serious. We were dating, that's all."

"I tried to tell him that, but he wouldn't buy it. She was planning to run away. He had proof. She had money stashed, clothes, everything. And you were the only one in the picture."

"It wasn't me," I said, shaking my head. "You screwed up my life for nothing. And apparently she ran away, anyway."

"Or tried to. Personally, I don't think she made it. I think she's dead."

"Why? From what I've heard so far—"

"It's got nothing to do with the facts," he said, "it's just a feeling I have. Hell, it's been twenty years. Remember what she was like? Wild, full of life? She wouldn't play cat-and-mouse for all these years. She wouldn't do that to Alec. Or the rest of us."

"But somebody is," I said.

"Somebody is," he nodded. "Look, ah, I don't suppose it means much, but—I'm sorry about what happened to you. I've lost a lot of sleep about it over the years."

"You're right," I said, "it doesn't mean much. And I think I'll find someplace else to spend the night if it's all the same. Thanks for being straight with me, Lanny. Even if it's a bit late."

"Look, I know you're angry, but there's no point in stompin' out in a huff. There's noplace to stay in Lincolnsburg any more—Curry's Motel closed years ago. You might as well stay here. You're welcome and we've got plenty of room."

"So I see. Was this part of the deal, too?"

"No," he said coolly. "This came later. Much later."

"What did it cost you, Lanny? Your soul?"

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"Maybe," he nodded, "sometimes I think maybe it did. I'm sorry, Bobby. About everything."

"So am I. Just one more thing. Why didn't you answer my letters when I was in the hospital? It would have meant a lot to me."

"I didn't get any letters from you, Bobby. Nobody got any but your folks. Alec had your mail intercepted. Hoping to find some clue about Rose."

"Are you telling me he owns the government, too?"

"Not the whole government, just the local postmaster. And almost everything else in this corner of the state. I know what you're thinking, Bobby. But don't do it. He's been half crazy since Rose disappeared. Let him alone."

"I'll think about it," I said.

Lanny's guest bedroom was comfortable enough, but I didn't sleep much. I lay awake for what was left of the night staring at the patterns in the ceiling tile. Trying to trace my lifeline. All these years, I'd thought I'd been following my own path, a career in the Corps. I didn't regret my choice, but— I found myself wondering what my life might have been if some hill-country banker hadn't rearranged it to keep me away from his daughter. And what about Rose? What had happened to her? I'd told Lanny we weren't serious about each other, but that wasn't altogether true. I was serious.

And she was serious enough to spend a night with me at Curry's Motel once, even though nothing really happened. We went so far, and then we stopped. And I'd always cherished that memory. Of two kids too green to go all the way. Wanting to save the last mystery for—later. Only there wasn't any later for us. And the memory was a lie. How many more of my memories were lies?

At some point, I must've dozed, because I woke with a start from a nightmare, shaken and sweating. And angry. I took a cold shower, pulled on a polo shirt and jeans, and stormed out to the Mustang. And found Lanny looking over the car's engine.

Except that it wasn't Lanny, exactly. The tousle-haired blond kid with his head under the hood looked so much like the boy I'd grown up with that for a moment I almost believed in time travel.

"Mornin'," he said sheepishly. "Hope you don't mind me checkin' out your wheels, Mr. Cruz. I'm Tuffy Bradley. My dad's told me a lot about you. All bad," he added, with a grin as bright as the new day.

"Then it's probably all true," I said. We shook hands. His grip was

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firm but not a contest, and I liked him immediately. "You interested in cars, are you?"

"I live and breathe 'em," he nodded. "Got a 'sixty-eight Firebird with a 400 Chevy in it, a real screamer. This Mustang's got a decent mill, but all that smog equipment's gotta slow it some. How's it run?"

"I haven't really leaned on it," I said. "It's a rental."

"All the better. Maybe you'd like to try it out against my 'bird, maybe take a quick run down to Middlesboro for, say, a twenty-buck side bet?"

"Not a chance," I said. "Not the way this thing's set up now, anyway. Does a lot of racing go on around here?"

"Some. Ain't a lot else to do."

"How about in the hills?"

"Not so much. It's risky business up there, but I run through 'em now and again."

"Ever meet other cars up there? Like a red 'sixty-eight Corvette?"

"The famous ghost 'vette?" he grinned. "Nah, I've never come across it, and I get around. Some people claim they've seen it, probably the same folks that see Elvis all the time. It's just a story. Kids race up in the hills sometimes, and the sound carries a long way. Sure you don't wanna make a run?"

"Not today. How old are you, anyway?"

"Nineteen, goin' on twenty. Old enough to drive. Say, if you're headed into town, I could use a lift. Got the mufflers off my 'bird, can't afford a ticket."

"Climb in," I said.

I drove into Lincolnsburg for the first time in twenty years, riding with this boy who was the reincarnation of my old friend. It should have been a sentimental journey, I suppose. The town looked much as I remembered it. There was a new McDonald's where Lanny's dad's hardware had been, and the streets were all blacktopped now, but otherwise little had changed. Still, there was no feeling of nostalgia, of coming home, and I wondered if I'd ever feel that way about a place again.

I dropped Tuffy off at the garage where he worked, and went directly to the bank. Summer hours. Only one teller on duty on Saturday mornings. She told me Mr. Gilliland would probably be at home. "Doesn't care much for visitors, though," she added pointedly.

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I believed her.

The drive up to the Gilliland estate was a challenge, a twisting snake of a road, with blind curves, steep drops, and rockfall areas. I took it pedal to the metal, pushing the Mustang to its limit, working off some of my frustration on the car and the hills. And began to cool off a bit and think more clearly. I knew I was no match for Alec Gilliland in terms of political power and influence. This corner of Kentucky was his turf and the situation wasn't one I could resolve with an M-16 or a bayonet. But I couldn't just walk away from it, either.

I began passing red-brick fence markers miles before I arrived at the main gate, two massive fieldstone towers twenty feet high, supporting a wrought-iron arch that spanned the entrance—Paradise, in gothic brass letters.

The gate was open and I drove on through, down a beautifully maintained cobblestone drive nearly a mile long. The house was a sprawling, pre-Civil War gothic, painted blinding white with aqua trim, three and a half stories high, gingerbread gables, a pillared porch that surrounded the main house, a six-carriage stable, and a dozen outbuildings, many of them glass-roofed greenhouses. The grounds were as immaculately kept as a golf course and roughly the same size, guarded by the treeline of the hills.

A gardener was riding an oversized lawnmower off in the distance, its hum barely audible as I climbed out of the car. Not another soul in sight.

I pressed the buzzer several times, but no one answered, so I followed the porch around the side of the house. And found Alec Gilliland.

He was in the olympic-sized pool, churning the crystalline water to a froth, arms sweeping, legs scissoring in a crude, energetic breaststroke. He wasn't making much headway. A nylon line attached to a canvas belt around his rubbery waist was tied to the pool ladder, tethering him in place midway across the pool. He was a huge man, several inches taller and probably a hundred pounds heavier than I, nude save for the belt and his swimcap, with thighs like tree-trunks, his broad back and muscular buttocks covered with a thick, silvery pelt, matted by the water.

I circled the pool until my shadow fell across him. He didn't seem to notice at first, just kept thrashing away, mindless as a Galapagos turtle, then abruptly he stopped swimming and rolled upright, treading water, squinting up at me, blinking in the morning glare. He

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lumbered to the side of the pool, stood up, and slapped the top of the white metal timer, stopping it.

I'd met him only once or twice as a boy, but I could see he'd changed a great deal, heavier now, his face obscured by a coarse, gunmetal-grey beard that reminded me of pictures of Hemingway near the end of his life. He peeled off the swimcap, knuckled the water out of his eyes, and turned to face me. Neither of us spoke for a bit, each evaluating the other. His eyes were fierce and alert, belying his age, the drooping lids giving him a hooded, predatory look that matched his crooked hawk's nose.

"Mornin'," he said at last. "I imagine you'll be Mr. Cruz. Pull up a chair, sir, set yourself down. Can I offer you breakfast?"

"No thanks," I said, "I won't be staying long."

"If you're here on business, Mr. Cruz, I keep regular hours at the bank. If you'd care to make an appointment—?"

"This is personal, Mr. Gilliland, and private. Just you and me."

"I thought it might be," he said calmly, heaving his bulk out of the water to perch on the tiled edge of the pool. He mopped his face off with a turkish towel, then draped it casually over his lap. "I gather you've found out about my, ah, arrangin' the start of your military career. Lanny tell you, did he?"

"Among other things, yes, he did."

"Pity. Figured he might when I heard you were back in town. He's a fine boy, Lanny, but when he's drinkin' he ain't got the sense of a newt. So. You're here, and I suppose you're angry. Well, before you light into me, perhaps I can spare us both some unpleasantness. I apologize for what happened back in 'sixty-nine, Mr. Cruz. I had no right to interfere in your life, and I only did so because I perceived it to be in my daughter's best interest. I know you have no children, but I'm sure you can understand a parent's concern. In any case, if there's any reasonable way I can make amends, I'll be happy to do so."

"Just like that," I said.

"Mr. Cruz, I'm a businessman and you're a soldier, which makes us, I believe, practical men by necessity, if not by nature. So I ask you, sir, one man to another, at this late date what more can I offer to do? What is it you want?"

"Nothing," I said. "There's nothing I want from you."

"Then why are you here?"

"To tell you something, Mr. Gilliland. About Rose."

He stiffened slightly, his eyes narrowing, then forced himself to

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relax. "I have a great many roses, Mr. Cruz, gardens and greenhouses full of them. If you care to discuss horticulture, feel free. But if you have any thought of somehow settlin' a score between us by defaming the memory of my dead child, I warn you you'll be makin' the greatest mistake of your young life."

"You're certain she is dead, then?"

"Of course. She left this house in a rage to run off to you, and there was a terrible accident. And she was gone. I've taken an intense interest in your career, sir. I know she never joined you. There was some—confusion at the time, because her remains weren't found, but any number of things might explain that. The car fell a long way, and there are bogs, and ah—" his mouth narrowed "—and animals in these hills, Mr. Cruz. I prefer to believe she went straight to her Creator, like the prophet Elijah, in a glorious chariot of fire. It helps me to accept her passin'.

"Oh, I'm well aware someone's been playin' games lately, racing a car like hers through the hills, setting fires at night, sending flowers to folks. I imagine it's a confidence scheme of some kind, and eventually they'll come to me for money. Is that why you're here? To sell me information?"

"No, sir, to give you some," I said, easing down on my haunches beside him, our faces only a few inches apart. "I came to tell you that you made a mistake when you trashed my life all those years ago. Rose wasn't running to me."

"I don't understand," he said slowly.

"It's simple. Rose and I never planned anything like that. We just weren't that serious about each other."

"You don't consider checking into a motel with my daughter a serious matter?"

"That was a sham," I said. "I didn't realize it at the time, but it was. If it's any comfort to you, nothing happened, nothing at all. Rose was using me, Mr. Gilliland, as a decoy to distract you, and it worked. When she ran off, it wasn't to join me. There must have been someone else."

"You're lying," he snapped. "She was a headstrong girl, but she wasn't malicious. She wouldn't have done such a thing. To either of us."

"You'd know better than I, of course," I said, easing to my feet. "They say the apple never falls far from the tree."

"But if she wasn't running off to you, who—?"

"I've no idea, and I doubt that it matters now. She might have

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concocted a scheme to escape your reach for a bit, but she would surely have contacted you long since."

"But if there's even the slightest chance. The fires?"

"Probably just pranks. I intend to look into them, though. I'm damned tired of being jerked around."

"Still, if you find anything of interest to me, it would behoove you to—pass it along. I can be a generous friend, Mr. Cruz."

"Yeah, so I've gathered. Quite a place you have here, sir. Makes me wonder."

"About what?"

"Why Rose was so dead set on getting away."

"Love is a powerful drive, son, even puppy love. Young people in its grip seldom know what's best for them."

"Seems to me if you had such terrific insight into what was right for Rose, things should have turned out a bit better."

"Yes—" he nodded coldly "—that thought's occurred to me as well, Mr. Cruz. Many times. And I don't take kindly to your remindin' me of it. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a lot of ocean to cover. You'll pardon me for not showin' you out. I'm not exactly dressed for comp'ny." He levered his bulk down into the water, pulled on his swimcap, and waded toward the center of the pool. I shrugged and turned to leave.

"Oh, Mr. Cruz," he called after me. "Will you be stayin' on after the reunion, do you think?"

"Probably not," I said. "Why?"

"Just wonderin'. It's just that seein' you again reminds me of things I've been workin' hard to forget. I think it'd be best if you moved on, sir, best for both of us. Go back to Virginia and get on with your life. And leave me what's left of mine."

"And if I choose not to 'move on,' as you put it?"

"Then stay." He grinned, a tiger's smile at feeding time. "I believe a man should do as he likes. I surely do." He turned away and began to swim, slowly at first, until he felt the gentle tug of the tether, then he gradually increased his pace, churning the water to foam, as though he was surrounded by a school of frenzied sharks. And still I had the distinct impression that he was holding himself in check. That if he'd strained just a bit harder, the old man could have snapped that line like a thread, or perhaps ripped the pool right out of the ground, and his whole damned mountaintop along with it.

The *Lincolnsburg Herald* office shared a rundown storefront just

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off Main Street with a dentist's office. Given the building's turn-of-the-century facade and the ornate gilded lettering in the dingy window, I half expected to be greeted by the rattle of a press and an old gent with a green eyeshade, but the office was quiet as a library, with worn beige carpeting, newsprint wallpaper, a couple of file cabinets, and Julie Cohen/Goodman working alone at a computer terminal. She was wearing hornrimmed glasses, a dark plaid skirt, and matching T-shirt. She looked a bit more like the gawky colt of a girl I remembered from high school, but in daylight it was even more apparent that she'd grown into a very attractive woman.

"Hi," I said, "I've come to visit your morgue."

"It'll be a short visit, then," she said without glancing up. "We don't have one."

"You don't keep any back issues of the *Herald* at all?"

"Give me oonne second, please—" she frowned, her fingers flicking across the terminal keys "—and—there. Finished. Now, what did you need? Oh, yes—back issues. I think we have a box or two left in the storeroom, but Lisa Friedrich and I transferred most of them to microfilm years ago. She has them on file at the library, but I'm afraid it closes at noon on Saturday. Maybe I can help you, though, since I wrote most of what's on file, anyway. What do you want to know?"

"About Rose Gilliland's disappearance or death or whatever."

"I thought that would be it," she said coolly. "Well, there isn't much on file, anyway. Dad ran a story on the accident the morning after it happened, but we—chose not to follow up on it."

"Orders from Alec Gilliland? Funny, I thought the First Amendment applied even in Kentucky."

"It does, when we choose to apply it. My father and Alec are old friends, and around here friends look out for each other. For what it's worth, we didn't run the story on your scrape with the law down in Florida, either."

"Because Alec asked you not to?"

"Nope, that was my decision. So. What do you want to know about your old flame? Excuse me, poor choice of phrase."

"I suppose the obvious question is, where is she?"

"You mean is she still alive?" The door swung open behind me and Lisa Friedrich walked in, frowning at Julie's last comment. On Lisa, a scowl was an impressive thing. She was nearly as tall as I am, and probably only a few pounds lighter. She was wearing a sea-green running suit and jogging shoes, her flat-planed Nordic face

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and ice-blue eyes a sharp contrast to Julie's gentler Mediterranean mien.

"Good God," she said bruskly, "I hope you're not still playing at that, Cruz. It may seem like a sick joke to you, but—"

"Hey," I protested mildly, "I'm not the joker here. I'm the jokee."

"Are you?" she said, arching her brows. "You were always a wise-acre in school, Cruz, maybe you still think you are. Are you ready to go, Julie?"

"If you're going to lunch, I'll be happy to buy—" I began.

"Not lunch," Julie said, unsnapping her plaid skirt and folding it over the back of her chair, revealing nylon jogging shorts clinging to a trim figure. "Ladies of the Eighties don't eat and run, we just run. You're welcome to tag along if you think you can keep up."

"I'm sure Bobby has better things to do," Lisa said.

"Au contraire," I said, "I'd like to come—for a bit, anyway. Where are we running to?"

"The hills—" Julie smiled "—halfway to Paradise."

One thing about eastern Kentuck, when you leave a small town, you really leave it. Five minutes off Main Street we were already in the foothills, jogging along a well-traveled trail. Lisa and Julie were obviously seasoned, serious runners, maintaining a steady eight-mile-minute pace on the gradual uphill grade. I lagged behind a bit at first, waiting for my hungover system to wake up and kick into gear, and it did after a quarter mile or so, legs and breathing melding into a steady, pumping rhythm, one that I could maintain all day if I had to.

The scenery was spectacular, rolling hills broken by tall stands of aspen and pine, carpeted with a thick mat of white laurel and wine-hued rhododendrons, with Lincolnsburg nestled along the banks of the Liege in the valley below. Whoever named the Paradise Hills hadn't exaggerated much. Still, there'd been a time when Kentuck was called the Dark and Bloody Ground, too. I picked up my pace a bit.

"How are you holding up?" Julie grinned, glancing at me in frank speculation.

"I'm fine," I said. "You up to talking while you run?"

"Sure, what shall we talk about?"

"How about these hills," I said, "and what's been happening in them?"

"You won't let it alone, will you, Cruz?" Lisa snapped.

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"Come on, Lisa, aren't you curious about what's going on?"

"It has nothing to do with me, then or now, and I don't care to hear any more about it." She lengthened her stride, leaving Julie and me ten yards or so behind.

"Touchy, isn't she?" I said.

"A lot of people are, Bobby. And since Lisa and Rose were friends—"

"Were they? I don't recall seeing her around."

"I guess it was before you and Rose started dating. Her dad was transferred to California during summer vacation our junior year, and they moved. She finished school there, went on to U.S.C."

"She graduated from U.S.C. and then came back here?"

"Some of us like it here, Bobby," Julie said stiffly. "To someone who's been all over the world, it may not seem like much, but—"

"I didn't mean it like that. This is beautiful country, as fine as I've ever seen."

"But you've never been back."

"Maybe I wasn't sure I'd be welcome."

"Some people would've been—darn it, I should have known she'd do that."

Ahead of us the running trail split, and Lisa had taken the left fork, a steeper, rougher track that circled to the north.

"Whooee, I don't think I'm ready for that one," I said. "You go on ahead, I'll just walk back down."

"Are you sure? I'll be glad to walk with you if you like."

"Nah, I'm just hungover from last night. Go on and catch Lisa, if you think you can."

"I can catch her, all right," Julie grinned, "but I thought Marines were supposed to be made of sterner stuff. See you tonight at the dance?"

"Absolutely," I called after her as she loped off effortlessly, gaining on Lisa with every stride. I waved as the two of them crested the ridge, and she waved back. I waited until they disappeared, then set off at an easy trot down the right fork, literally following my nose.

The hill-country breeze was a wind symphony of natural scents—pine, wild fern, sassafras—and, buried in the mix, the acrid tang of powdersmoke. I'd recognized the aroma a ways back, but it didn't occur to me for several minutes what was odd about it. The nitrate scent was strong, but I hadn't heard any gunfire.

It's tricky business trailing a scent on the wind. Dogs do it with ease, of course, but they probably don't waste time backtracking and

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second-guessing themselves. After a mile or so, I broke over a ridge, and slowed to a walk. The valley was spread out below like an earth-tone tapestry and the scent was much stronger now, obviously close by. Twenty yards down the face of the ridge, I found it—a blackened area concealed by a rockfall, the site of the spectral fire we saw last night. There was nothing ghostly about it, it was very neatly done. Except for the nitrate scent, it left almost no trace—only a fine grey ash, probably bulk gunpowder, 479AA or its equivalent.

I followed a thin line of ash farther into the rocks and found a melted lump of clear plastic in a shallow depression atop a boulder. Apparently it was the remains of the ignition device, but it wasn't military. And yet it seemed familiar somehow. Why was it up here away from the main charge? Hell, why set the fire at all? Psywar? Against whom? I tucked the lump of plastic in my pocket and walked back to Lincolnsburg.

The county sheriff's office was in the basement of the courthouse, a pretentious old domed building that faces the city square. Leo Colter was alone in the front counter, wearing a freshly pressed uniform—a bit red-eyed, but otherwise looking none the worse from last night's party.

"Mornin', Bobby. Comin' in to give yourself up?"

"Not exactly. I thought I'd do my civic duty and pass along some information. I came across the site of that fire we saw in the hills last night."

"Where?"

"Hidden in a rockslide, about halfway to Paradise."

"Grey ash, little lump o' plastic layin' in it?"

"That's right. You've seen it before?"

"A couple dozen times or so over the years—always on the anniversary of the night Rose Gilliland blew up her 'vette—and lately every ten days or so. Not much I can do about it. Mr. G. owns the hills and he's not pushin' anything."

"Any idea who's starting them? Or how?"

"The how's simple. The lump of plastic's the remains of a cheap magnifyin' glass set so it catches the late-afternoon sun and sets off some kind of a slow fuse to a pile of reloadin' powder. Crude setup, the kind a kid would use."

"But why?"

"You're supposed to be the hotshot intelligence officer, Major Cruz, you tell me."

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"I'll be damned," I said softly, "you really did run a check on me."

"Why not? Last I heard you were a felon. So how about it? Any ideas about the fires?"

"I don't know. Psywar, I suppose, reminding the enemy you're there. At Khe Sanh in 'seventy-two, Charlie kept a hundred fires burning in the hills every night trying to spook us. It worked, too. But why would anyone set fires here?"

"I don't know." Leo sighed. "Hell, maybe it really is Rose."

"You're not serious?"

"All I know is, that car was pretty well smashed up even before it burned, but she wasn't in it or anywhere near it. Half the town turned out to search. Helicopters, hounds, the whole works. The dogs acted like she might've walked back up to the road, but there'd been so many people trompin' around we couldn't be sure."

"Mr. G. seems to be certain she's dead."

"The man's daughter disappears, no word from her in all these years. What else could he believe?"

"But you think she might be alive?"

"I don't know. I understand her mama's been in a funny farm for a lotta years. Maybe Rose went bonkers, too. You and Lanny were the only guys she went with that year, what's your guess?"

"Rose dated Lanny? When was this?"

"He took up with her after you got jammed up down in Lauderdale. Hot and heavy, like they was made for each other. You didn't know?"

"No. I guess he forgot to mention it."

"Yeah," Leo smirked, "I can see how he might've, you two bein' such great buddies and all."

I spent most of the afternoon wandering the streets of Lincolnsburg, brooding, remembering, playing a solitary, no-win game of what-if with myself. I stopped by the garage where Tuffy worked to talk for a minute, but he was busy and I didn't stay long. I didn't return to Lanny's until just before it was time to leave for the reunion. We had one quick drink for the road, but Lanny and I had little to say to each other. Peach eyed us with stolid speculation, but if she was curious she smothered it with a quick "snack" of hoecakes'n'honey. Lanny brightened a bit when I asked for a lift to the dinner, taking it as a peace offering. But it wasn't. There are things you can forgive and things you can't.

The ride to the party was as grim as a wake. The township hall was half filled when we arrived, nearly a hundred strong—a mixed

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group wearing everything from T-shirts and jeans to business suits and elegant party dresses. The air was delicious with the scent of fried chicken, cornbread, black-eyed peas—gourmet redneck cookin' with a vengeance. A country band was setting up in the far corner of the room, pudgy men with slicked-down hair and matching plaid shirts hauling amps and a drumset in through a side door. No alcoholic beverages were served, to avoid giving offense to the churchgoers, but the b.y.o. group was in the majority and respectable doses of juice were being consumed from fluted wineglasses and long-necked beer bottles. All of the components for a fine get-together were in place, and yet it just wasn't happening. Conversations were muted and there was no laughter. People coalesced into small, defensive groups, instinctively recreating the high-school cliques of twenty years before. Uneasiness hung in the air like smoke. Powdersmoke perhaps.

Over the years, I'd often thought of coming back to Lincolnsburg, but never had, because—as I'd told Julie—I thought I might not be welcome. Still, in my secret heart I'd half expected to be greeted with glad cries and open arms—all is forgiven. It never occurred to me that nobody would care much one way or the other, but that seemed to be the case. Of my few close friends in high school, one was missing, Lanny and Peach and I were avoiding each other by tacit agreement, and apparently my connection with Rose had made me a pariah with everyone else. I felt like the Ghost of Christmas Past at an Easter party. And then Julie arrived.

I didn't realize I'd been waiting for her until I saw her walk in with Leo Colter, and felt my last glimmer of hope for the evening fade. I glumly found a place by myself at the end of a banquet table as Barb McSorley rapped sharply on her tabletop with a serving spoon and got the festivities under way.

"All right, everybody, settle down, please—settle down. On behalf of the student council of Lincolnsburg High, I'd like to welcome you all to the twentieth reunion of the Class of 1969." There was a faint smattering of applause, but it quickly faltered and died. "Dinner's on the make and we'll be serving shortly, but first the reunion committee has a little program planned and some awards to give away. Let me begin by introducing our class president, and mayor of Lincolnsburg, Hizzoner Lanny Bradley."

The applause was more substantial this time, with Barb leading it. Lanny gave a wobbly bow as he stood and almost toppled over, which brought a ripple of laughter and even more applause. They

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thought he was clowning, but he wasn't. His face was flushed and sweat-slicked, and I realized he was already very drunk indeed.

"How do, gang," Lanny slurred. "Great to see your smilin', somewhat beat-up faces again. I'm not up for reelection until next year, so I won't be makin' any speeches—"

"Awwrriight!" Jumbo Haas bellowed, leaping to his feet and applauding, which brought more laughter. But I noticed Lanny was startled by the interruption, and seemed confused.

"I, uh, well, why don't we get right to the awards part of the program? First off, I got this giant box o' diapers to award to the couple with the most kids. That'd be Barb and Larry McSorley with six, unless somebody forgot to put a name or two on y'all's info cards. By the way, I'd be givin' Barb some competition for this award, but she said the kids had to be legit."

Jumbo guffawed loudly, but no one else laughed. Lanny groped for his drink, but Peach had moved it out of reach. She'd piled her plate high with potato salad in the kitchen and was methodically consuming it, the only person in the room who was eating.

"Secondly, we got a big prize for the guy who needs it the least," Lanny continued, "which accordin' to our panel of unbiased judges is our upstandin' county sheriff, Leo Colter." There was a ripple of self-conscious laughter as a giant comb was passed down the table to Leo, who accepted it with a forced grin.

"Next, I have a brand spankin' new roadmap to award to the person who traveled the farthest to be here tonight. There was some debate about it, but I guess it goes to our prodigal son, Major Bobby Cruz, who claims he was in Japan when he got his invite."

In the distance I heard a faint whine, no louder than a mosquito. I decided it was now or never, and stood up. "I, ah, I'm afraid I can't accept," I said.

"Why not?" Lanny said.

"It wouldn't be fair. I may not have traveled the farthest."

"You must be kidding. What's farther away than Japan?"

"Heaven," I said. "Or maybe hell. Wherever Rose Gilliland's coming from, it's farther than Japan."

In the stunned silence, the faint whine was growing louder.

"This isn't funny, Bobby," Lanny said, flushing. "I—"

"I'm not joking. Rose is coming here tonight, from wherever she's been. In her Corvette. Can't you hear it?" The whine gradually rose to a roar as a car driven at speed howled into the parking lot and

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skidded to a stop with a shriek of rubber outside the front dodor. Then a silence you could cut with a knife.

"All right, Cruz," Leo Colter said, rising.

"Shut up, Leo," Lanny snapped. In the silence, the footsteps coming up the front stairs were deafening. And there was a knock on the door.

"Rose?" Lisa Friedrich said softly, tears streaming down her face. "Rose?"

The door opened slowly, and Tuffy Bradley stuck his head in. "Mr. Cruz? I got your car all set. It's—"

"You sonofabitch!" Lanny shouted, and hurled the microphone at me. It snapped taut at the end of its cord and bounced to the floor, filling the air with an unearthly feedback shriek. The room dissolved into chaos, everyone on their feet, confused, shouting. Tuffy paled and ducked out the door. Leo Colter vaulted over his table and seized my arm.

"All right, Cruz, the joke's over and you're leavin'."

"No problem," I said, letting him push me through the door.

"Wait a minute," Lanny said, stumbling out onto the porch, white-faced, his hair disheveled. "Bobby, why? What the hell did you think you were doin'?"

"I wanted to know what happened," I said simply.

"By scarin' everybody out of their wits?" Leo snapped.

"Something like that," I said, opening the door of the Mustang.

"Well?" Lanny said. "Did you find out anything?"

"Maybe," I said, "I'm not sure."

"Maybe? What's that supposed to—"

"It don't mean nothin'!" Leo growled. "It was just another wiseass high-school joke."

I shrugged and slid in behind the wheel.

"Damnit, Bobby, hold on," Lanny said, grabbing the car door, holding it open. "Is it true? Was it a joke?"

"No," I said, "it wasn't."

"Then what were you tryin' to prove, wiseguy?" Leo said.

"Maybe you should have been watching their faces, Leo," I said, "instead of watching the door."

"Bull!" Leo began, but his retort was lost in the roar as I fired up the Mustang's V-8, popped it into gear, and gunned it out of the parking lot.

I had most of my gear collected and packed when I heard Lanny's

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front door open and footsteps coming down the hall. They paused just outside my room. "Bobby?" Peach called softly. "Are you in there?"

"Sure, Peach, come on in. I'm decent."

She opened the door and shuffled in hesitantly. "There was so much fuss," she said, lowering her bulk to the edge of the bed, "I wanted to be sure you were okay."

"No, Peach," I said, kneeling in front of her, looking into her bloated face, "that's not why you came. Lanny told you what I was trying to do, didn't he? And you wondered. Well, I'll make it easy for you. Everyone was looking at the door, and most of them were uneasy to some extent. Except for Lisa, who was crying, and you Peach. You were absolutely terrified."

"You're wrong," she said listlessly, avoiding my eyes.

"No, I'm not. I'm a soldier, Peach, and I've been afraid more times in more ways than I can count. Believe me, I know fear when I see it. But I know you, too, Peach, or I used to. And I can't believe you'd deliberately hurt anyone."

"No," she breathed, "it wasn't like that at all."

"Then how was it?" I asked. "We were friends once, Peach, and you can still trust me. Tell me what happened."

"I'm not sure," she said slowly. "It's all—muddled now. Rose was hinting around school that she was going to run away, and when you and Lanny and Jumbo went down to Lauderdale I thought she might. But then you went to jail, and when Lanny came back, he dropped me and started dating Rose—"

"And you were pregnant, weren't you?" I said softly. "With Tuffy."

"I was scared," she nodded, "things were different then. My folks—" She shrugged helplessly and took a long, ragged breath. "Rose was still spreading it around about what a big surprise she'd spring on her dad graduation week, so I knew she was still planning to run off, but with Lanny instead of you. So I decided to talk to her, to tell her how it was with me."

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was driving up to her place, when I saw her headlights coming through the hills, so I parked partway on the road so she'd have to stop. But she was coming too fast." Peach swallowed, wincing at the memory. "She ran off the road, and her car went down the ridge and crashed. She got out, and I thought she was all right. She came running back up the hill, yelling at me, but when she got close I saw her face was all blood. And then her car blew up, and she fell.

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I helped her into my car and drove like crazy through the hills. I knew she was hurt bad and all I could think of was the hospital in Middlesboro, but—she died. Before we got even halfway there. I'd been talking to her, to keep her awake, and—God. She just stopped breathing."

"Where is she now, Peach? What did you do with her?"

"I buried her," she said wonderingly. "I'm not even sure where. In the hills outside of Middlesboro. I dug a place with my hands, in the dark. I—I know it sounds crazy now, but I didn't know what else to do. Her father—you know what he's like."

"Yes," I nodded, "I know what he's like."

"I didn't mean for it to happen, Bobby," she said, clutching my wrist. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, getting slowly to my feet, "I believe you."

"And you won't tell?"

"No," I said, "but I think you will. Eventually you'll have to talk to someone. It's killing you, Peach."

"No," she said, "it's not. I—didn't mean it to happen, but I only did what I had to. For Lanny and Tuffy, I—"

"But you didn't have to do anything," I said, snapping my suitcase shut. "Rose wasn't going anywhere with Lanny."

"Of course she was. You were gone and she said—"

"She didn't have to run away to be with Lanny, Peach. The old man likes him. He'd have given them the moon."

"I don't understand," she said. "What are you saying?"

"I think she was dating Lanny to keep her father pacified, after what happened to me. And to protect the person she'd really loved all along, someone she knew her father would never accept. Someone he'd certainly try to destroy."

"But who?"

"I'm not sure. Possibly Lisa. She was living in California at the time. It's really not important now."

"My God," she whispered. "It was for nothing. All these years—For nothing!"

"Don't do that to yourself, Peach. You didn't intend it to happen."

"Go away, Bobby," she said dully, "let me alone. You shouldn't have come back. This is your fault. All your fault."

"Maybe it is," I said, picking up my suitcase. "I'm sorry. Goodbye, Peach."

She didn't answer. I carried the suitcase out and tossed it in the trunk of the car.

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I glanced back at the house as I pulled out. Peach was sitting at the kitchen table, eating. I couldn't see what it was, and I doubt that she knew, either.

I drove through Lincolnsburg to pick up the main highway. I hadn't intended to stop, but there was a light in the window of the *Herald* office and I parked in front. Julie Cohen/Goodman was alone, working at her computer terminal. I tapped on the glass and she glanced up, startled, her eyes very large and dark. She motioned me in. The door wasn't locked.

"Hi," I said. "Bit late for office hours, isn't it?"

"Neither rain, nor snow, nor dark of night," she said. "You're leaving, aren't you." It wasn't a question.

"It seems like the thing to do under the circumstances. How's Lisa?"

"Upset. A lot of people are. Lisa said something though, that—I think she may be the one who's been lighting the fires. A kind of memorial. I think she's a bit—unstable where Rose is concerned. Maybe she always has been. They were good friends."

"I'm sorry if I upset her. I didn't mean to."

"No, I suppose not," she said, eyeing me thoughtfully. "Leo told me what you tried to do. So? Did it work out?"

"No," I said, "it didn't."

"You shouldn't try to lie, Bobby Cruz," she said, shaking her head. "You have no aptitude for it."

"I'm not— Well, okay, maybe I am. Okay, I promise not to lie if you promise not to ask me any more questions. —How did you know I was lying?"

"I suppose it doesn't matter much now," she said. "I had a crush on you in high school, Cruz. But you never noticed. All you could see was Rose."

"No, not even Rose. Not truly. All I saw was a dynamite chick in a red Corvette. I don't think I ever really knew her. Hell, I'm not sure anybody ever really knows anybody. And on that thought, I'd better get going. I want to make Pikeville tonight."

"Will you be coming back, do you think?" she asked, meeting my eyes.

"No, I think this was probably my last reunion. But I'd like to see you again. Soon. Can I call you?"

"Yes," she smiled, "I'd like that."

She walked me out to the car. We hugged, like old friends, and

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then I climbed in and rolled down the window. "One last question," I said. "The truth now. You said you had a crush on me in high school. Did you send me that invitation?"

"No," she said. "I thought about it, but—no, I didn't know where you were."

"I see," I said, but I didn't. She waved as I drove off, and I watched her in the rearview mirror until she faded from view. As I headed out of Lincolnsburg, I glimpsed headlights far above me, flickering in the darkness of the Paradise Hills, and I could hear the distant howl of a full-bore V-8. A Corvette? Perhaps. But a lot of kids still race through those hills. And the sound carries a long, long way.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

TO EACH HIS/HER OWN

by ARETA LUCAS

Just before the game began,
Mary opened the coffee can,
Took out the gun she'd hidden there
And turned and hurried up the stair,
To where he sat so big and fat.
She pointed the gun—
It went bang bang!
"The game is over for you," she sang.
She opened the door and sauntered out,
And gleefully began to shout,
"Nothing will ever be the same,
He'll never watch another game!
With sports no longer need I cope,
Now I can watch my favorite soap!"

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first publication in the U.S.

"What have you done to yourself?" Bernard asked Judy.

She put her hand up to her face. She had a black eye. The cheekbone was dark-red and shiny with bruising and the corner of her lip was cut. Her finger touched the bruise. "Fell against the door, didn't I?" she said. It was a curious usage of language, that interrogatory. He wasn't sure if he had ever heard it before. "Kitchen door with a handle sticking out." She giggled . . .

THE COPPER PEACOCK

by RUTH RENDELL

Peter Seeburg lived in a flat without a kitchen.

"Kitchens make you fat," he said.

Bernard asked if that was one of the principles of the Seeburg Diet which Peter was going to the United States to promote. Peter smiled.

"All one needs," he said, "is an electric kettle in the bathroom and a fridge somewhere else." He added rather obscurely, "Eating out keeps you thin because it is so expensive."

He was lending the flat to Bernard while he was in America. They walked around it and Peter explained how things worked. The place was very clean. "A woman comes in three times a week. Her name's Judy. She won't get in your way."

"Do I have to have her?"

"Oh, dear, yes, you do. If I get rid of her for three months, I'll never get her back again and I can't do with that."

He would have to put up with it, Bernard supposed. Peter's kindness in lending him the flat, rent-free, to write his new biography in, was something he still found overwhelming. It was quiet here—was this the only street in west London not being renovated, not a noisy jumble of scaffolding and skips? No sounds of music penetrated the ceilings. The other tenants in the block did not, ap-

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parently, spend their mornings doing homework for their carpentry courses. The windows gave on to plane trees and Regency facades.

"She's very efficient. She'll probably wash your clothes if you leave them lying about. But you won't be sleeping here, will you?"

"Absolutely not," said Bernard.

As it was, he felt guilty about leaving Ann alone all day with the children. But it was useless to attempt working at home with a two-year-old and a three-year-old under the same roof with him. Memories were vivid of Jonathan climbing on his shoulders and Jeremy trying out felt-tipped pens on his notes while he was last correcting page proofs. Still, he would be back with them in the evenings. He would have to make up for everything to Ann in the evenings.

"There's no question of my sleeping here," he said to Peter as if he hadn't heard him the first time.

Peter gave him the keys. On Monday morning he was flying to Los Angeles, the first leg of his tour. Bernard arrived in a taxi two hours after he left, bringing with him two very large bags full of books. The biography he was embarking on was the life of a rather obscure Edwardian poet. His last book had been the life of a rather obscure Victorian diarist, and some critic had said of it that the excellence of the writing and the pace of the narrative transcended the fact that few had heard of its subject. Bernard had a gift for writing with elegance and panache about fairly undistinguished literary figures and for writing books that sold surprisingly well.

It was his habit to spread his works of reference out on the floor. He would create little islands of books and notebooks, a group here that dealt with his subject's childhood, a cluster there of criticism of his works, an archipelago of the views of his peers. Two or three rooms ideally should be reserved for this purpose. Some of the books lay open, others with slips of paper inserted between their pages. The notes were in piles that might seem haphazard to others but to Bernard were arranged in a complex but precise order.

As soon as he was inside Peter's flat and the front door closed behind him, Bernard began spreading his books out after this fashion. Already he felt a deep contentment that one particular notebook, containing new material he had assembled on his subject's ancestry, would lie undisturbed, surrounded by its minor islets, instead of being seized upon by Jonathan, as had happened to one of its predecessors, and given a new function as a kneading board for play dough. Bernard created a further island in the bedroom. He wouldn't otherwise be using the bedroom and the books could just lie there

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for weeks, gathering dust. This was another image which afforded him an intense intellectual pleasure. His typewriter set up on the dining table in the absence of a desk, he found himself making an enthusiastic start, something by no means usual with him.

On the following morning, though, he recalled that the books couldn't just lie there. No dust would gather because Judy would be coming in to see it did not. Resenting her presence in advance of her arrival, he picked up all the books, slipping in bits of paper at significant pages and sealing the bedroom pile by laying on top of it, open and face-downward, the earliest published biography of his poet. Beginning as he meant to go on, he was at the typewriter, busily working away, rather more busily and noisily in fact than the prose he was committing to paper warranted, when just after ten-thirty he heard the front door open and close.

Some few minutes had passed before she came into the dining room. She knocked first. Bernard was surprised by her youth. She looked no more than twenty-seven. He had expected a stout, aproned, motherly creature in her fifties. What cliches we make of life! She was slim, pretty, dark-haired, wearing jeans and a blouse. But the prettiness was worn-and the hair was rough and dry. She was too thin for the tight jeans to be tight on her and her hip bones stuck out like the sharp, curved frame of a lyre.

"Could you do with a coffee?" she said. No introduction, no greeting. Her smile was friendly and cheerful. "I get Peter his coffee about now."

Bernard castigated himself for a snob. Why on earth should she call Peter Mr. Seeburg, anyway? "Thank you. That's very kind of you." He put out his hand. "I'm Bernard Hope."

"Pleased to meet you, Bernard. Peter's told me all about you." For all the readily used christian names, her manner was a little shy, her handshake tentative. "Do you mind if I come in here for the milk?" she said. "I have to make the coffee in the bathroom, but he keeps his fridge in here."

"No, please, go ahead."

"Peter said you'd want all your books left just as they were, but you're very tidy, aren't you?" She didn't wait for an answer but said confidingly, with a slight giggle, "I'll never get over him not having a kitchen. You have to laugh. I get a laugh out of it every time I come here."

All this seemed ominous to Bernard. Fearing a prolonged dis-

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turbance of his peace, he set himself to typing furiously when she returned with the coffee. Perhaps this was effective as a deterrent or else she genuinely wanted to get on with her work, for she spoke no further word to him until the time came for her departure at half past twelve. Appearing at the dining-room door in a padded jacket, she mimed—to his astonishment—the action of pounding a keyboard.

"Keep on with the good work. See you Wednesday."

Bernard couldn't resist getting up to review the flat after she had gone. He was pleasantly surprised. Surfaces had been polished and there was a fresh flowery scent in the air. His books lay as he had left them, the slips of paper in place, the important notebook still face-downward and guarding the stack beneath it. He recreated his islands. The coffee cups had disappeared, been washed and restored to their home in a china cabinet. On one of the tables in the living room was a tray covered with a cloth and on the tray was a plate of the kind of sandwiches that are called "dainty," with a glass of orange juice, a polished red apple, and a piece of cheese. His lunch.

Bernard felt quite touched, although he quickly realized that she must do this for Peter and no doubt regarded it as part of the duties for which she was paid. Since Jeremy was born, Ann had never got lunch for him, he had always got his own. Not that he expected his wife to wait on him, of course not, she had the children and the house, more than enough to do. Two of the sandwiches were smoked salmon and two egg and cress. Judy must have brought their ingredients with her and assembled them in the bathroom.

Next day he was preparing to say something gracious, but he took a look at her and there was only one thing anyone could say.

"What have you done to yourself?"

She put her hand up to her face. She had a black eye. The cheekbone was dark-red and shiny with bruising and the corner of her lip was cut. Her finger touched the bruise. "Fell against the door, didn't I?" she said. It was a curious usage of language, that interrogatory. He wasn't sure if he had ever heard it before. "Kitchen door with a handle sticking out." She giggled. "That's what comes of having kitchens. Maybe Peter's got the right idea."

He asked her if she had seen a doctor. And when she said she hadn't—she hadn't the patience to sit waiting about for an hour or more just to get a prescription she'd have to pay for, anyway—he thanked her for getting his lunch. "You're welcome, love," she said,

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and "It's all in the day's work." He watched her test the tenderness of her cut lip with a questing tongue. "Ready for your coffee, are you, or d'you want to wait a bit?"

He had it later in the living room, perusing his notebook while she cleaned the dining room. Things were just as he had left them when he went back except that she had closed the work of reference he had left open by the typewriter and had marked his place with a sheet torn from a scribbling block.

Lunch that day was pate sandwiches and there was a pear on the tray and a piece of walnut cake. Next time he got gruyere cheese, mandarin yogurt, and a bunch of red grapes. It was something of a chore going out to buy pizza on the intervening days. The awful things that had happened to Judy's face made him think she might be accident-prone and at first he waited to hear her drop things, but she moved almost soundlessly about the flat, putting her head round the door to tell him when she was going to use the vacuum cleaner, apologizing in advance, and in the event getting it over as fast as possible. She made less noise about the place than Ann did, Ann who was exasperated by sweeping and dusting and who loudly cursed both tools and furniture. As soon as this thought came to him he felt guilty, so that night he took home a bottle of champagne and a begonia in a pot.

Peter phoned one afternoon during Bernard's third week there. It was early morning in Denver, Colorado, where he had arrived to spread the gospel of the Seeburg Diet. He wanted a book sent out to him. It was a book on calories and food combining that Bernard would find on one of the shelves in the bedroom up on the right-hand side.

"Everything okay?" he said. "How's the poet? How are you getting on with Judy?"

Bernard said the biography was progressing quite satisfactorily, thank you very much, and Judy was fine, marvelous, very efficient. There seemed no point in adding that this morning, though her face had healed and the discoloration around her eye faded, he had noticed bruises on her left arm and a strip of plaster on her left hand. That was hardly the kind of thing to talk about with Peter.

"She's what my poet's contemporaries would have called a treasure." His poet had in fact been attracted by servants, had a long-standing clandestine affair with his sister's nursery maid.

"Mind you say hello to her from me next time she comes . . ."

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Her hand was still plastered and her face looked as if bruised anew. Only it couldn't be, he must be imagining this, or she was tired or one of those people whose skin marks at a touch. It couldn't really be that the damaged eye had been injured again.

"Peter said to say hello."

The handy Americanism was evidently new to her but she worked it out.

"Sent his love, did he? You pass mine on next time he gives you a phone. I've got caviar for your sandwiches today—that lumpfish, really, but I reckon it tastes the same."

She showed him the jar. "Lovely color, isn't it? More like strawberry jam."

"You're good to me, Judy," he said.

"Get off. Good to you! You appreciate it, that's what I like. Not like Peter—cottage cheese and beansprouts day after day for him. Still, what can you expect if you don't have a kitchen?"

He remade his book islands once the front door had closed after her. The fate of his books, or rather the precariousness of the position of his bookmarks, no longer worried him. They were safe with Judy. Even if he failed to stack them before she came, they remained inviolate. And a strange thing had happened. He no longer wanted total silence and unobtrusiveness from her. He had arranged with her to bring his coffee at eleven, when he would break off for ten or even fifteen minutes for a chat. Mostly he talked to her and she listened while he spoke about his biography and his aims and his past career, necessarily simplifying things for this untutored audience. A look of wonder, or simple lack of comprehension, came into her thin, hungry face. She admired him, he was sure of it, and he was curiously touched by her admiration. He told himself it made him feel humble.

And he had hardly realized before how much he liked gracious living. The turmoil of home, the chaos, he had accepted as an inevitable corollary of modern life. Peter's flat was as he remembered his mother's home—clean, orderly, the woodwork shining, the upholstery not stained with spilt milk and chocolate smears. In the bathroom it wasn't necessary to pick one's way between the hazards of potty, disposable napkin packets, drying dungarees, and a menagerie of plastic amphibians in order to reach the lavatory. It was peaceful and silent and it smelt, not of urine, milk, and disinfectant, but of floor wax and the civilized dry bitter-sweetness of the chrysanthemums Judy had bought at the same time as the caviar . . .

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"You're quite in love with her," said Ann.

"Get off," said Bernard before he realized who he was quoting. "I only said she was a good housewife." She would hardly understand if he said he looked forward to ten-thirty, then to coffee time, to his conversation with this naive listener. It was more than he could understand himself how an interruption had become a pleasure.

Peter phoned from Chicago. It was just before seven in the morning there, so not yet one in London and Judy was still in the flat. Bernard thought Peter must be phoning so early to wish him a happy birthday and he felt quite touched. Ann hadn't exactly forgotten what this day was, she had only forgotten to get him a present. But the reason for Peter's call was to say the food-combining book had arrived and would Bernard send him the file of homeopathic pills from the bathroom cabinet.

"I'm halfway through my life today," said Bernard.

"Many happy returns. If I'd known, I'd have sent you a card. Say hello to Judy for me."

"You don't look forty," she said to him, standing in the doorway in her padded jacket.

For a moment he didn't know what she meant. When he did, he was mildly affronted, then amused. "Thirty-five," he said. "Halfway through man's allotted span. You think I'll make it to eighty, do you?"

"I didn't ought to have listened," she said. "Sorry. It was a bit of a cheek."

He had a curious impulse to put his arm round her thin shoulders and press her quickly close to him. But of course he couldn't do that. "Get off," he said. "Why shouldn't you listen? It wasn't private."

She said goodbye and left and he put his books back on the floor. Rather reluctantly he returned to work. His subject had been acquainted with the great literary figures of the day and Bernard was about to write of his first meeting, while at university in Dublin, with James Joyce. Joyce, he reflected, had lived with and later married a servant—a chambermaid, wasn't she? It had been a happy partnership between the giant of letters and his Nora, the nearly illiterate woman.

Ham sandwiches and thinly sliced avocado, sesame-seed biscuits, a glass of apple juice. For once he wasn't hungry for it. What he would have liked—he suddenly saw the rightness of it—was to have taken Judy out for lunch. Why hadn't he thought of it while she was

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still there? Why hadn't he thought of it as a way of celebrating his birthday? Although she had been gone twenty minutes, he went to the window and looked out to see if, by remote chance, she might still be waiting at the bus stop. There was no one in the bus shelter but an old man reading the timetable.

They could have gone to the Italian restaurant round the corner. She was so thin, he wondered if she ever got a decent meal. He would have enjoyed choosing the dishes for her and selecting the wine. A light sparkling Lambrusco would have been just the thing to please her, and he would have put up with it even though it might be rather showy and obvious for him. But she had gone and it was too late. In her absence he felt restless, unable to concentrate. He had no phone number for her, no address—he didn't even know her surname. If she didn't come on Tuesday, if she never came again, he wouldn't know how to find her, he would have lost her forever.

This anxiety was absurd, for of course she did come. His weekend had been unpleasant, with Jonathan developing a virus infection and Ann announcing that she meant to go back to work in the spring. He had to stay at home on Monday to look after the sick child while Ann took Jeremy for a dental appointment. The quietness and order of Peter's flat received him, seemed to welcome him with a beckoning and a smile. Only another month and Peter would be home, but he didn't want to think of that.

At ten-thirty, Judy let herself in. She was always punctual. The bruises faded, the scars healed, she looked very pretty. He thought what an exceedingly good-looking woman she was with that flush on her cheeks and her eyes bright. Instead of going to his work table and his typewriter, he had waited for her in the living room, and when she came in he did something he normally did for women but had never done for her. He laid his book aside and stood up. It seemed almost to alarm her.

"Are you okay, Bernard?"

He smiled, nodded. He had never actually witnessed her arrival before and now he watched her remove her jacket, take indoor shoes out of her bag and put them on, remarking as she did so, reverting to the aspect of the place that endlessly amused her, that if Peter had had a kitchen she would have been able to change there. The scuffed boots she wore outdoors tucked inside the bag, she took from it a small package, a box it looked like, wrapped in silver-spotted pink paper. Her manner becoming awkward, she said to Bernard,

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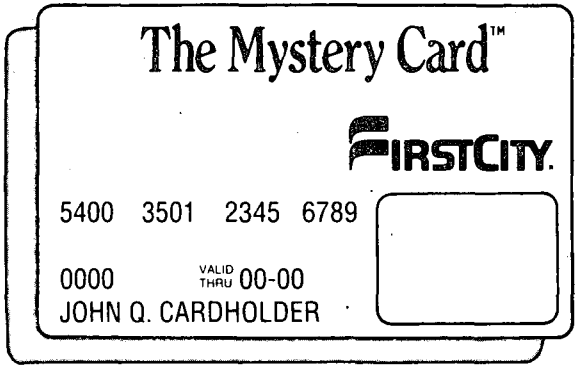

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thrusting the package into his hands, "Here, this is for you. Happy birthday."

She was blushing. She had gone a fiery red. Bernard untied the ribbon and took off the paper. Inside the box, on a piece of cotton wool, lay a metal object about six inches long and an inch wide. Its shaft was flat like the blade of a knife and attached to a hook on the top, which curved backward in a U-shape, was a facsimile of a peacock with tail spread fanwise, the whole executed in beaten copper and a mosaic of blue, green, and purple glass chips. To Bernard it looked at first like some piece of cheap jewelry, a woman's hair ornament or clip. He registered its tawdry ugliness, felt at a loss for words. What was it? He looked up at her.

"It's a bookmark, isn't it?" She spoke with intense earnestness. "You put it in your book to show where you've got to."

He was still mystified.

"Look, I'll show you." She picked up the book he had been reading, a memoir of the Stephen family, who had also been acquainted with his poet. At the place he had reached, she inserted the copper knife blade and, closing the book on it, hooked the peacock over the top of the spine. "See how it works?"

"Yes—thanks. Thank you very much."

Confidingly, she said, "I couldn't help seeing, while I've been working about, the way you'd always leave one of your books open and face-down. Well, you don't like to turn down the corner of the page, do you, not when it's a library book? It doesn't seem right. So I thought, it's his birthday, I know what I'll do, I'll get him one of these. I'd seen them in this shop, hadn't I? One of those'd be just the thing for him and his books, I thought."

It was a curious kind of shock. The thing was hideous. It seemed more of an affront because it was books it must inevitably be associated with, books which he had such a special, dedicated feeling about. If it didn't sound too silly and pretentious, he could almost have said books were sacred. The peacock's tail, curved breast, and stupid face glittered against the dull brown of the binding. The manufacturer had even managed to get red into it. The bird's eyes were twin points of ruby red. Bernard took the book and his new bookmark into the dining room. He found himself closing the door for the first time in weeks. Of course he would have to use the bloody thing. She would look for it, expect to see it every time she came. If he left one of his books face-downward she would want to know why he wasn't using his new bookmark.

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"You do like it, don't you, Bernard?" she said when she brought his coffee.

"Of course I like it." What else could he say?

"I thought you'd like it. When I saw it I thought, that's just the thing for Bernard."

Why did they always have to say everything twice, these people? She had seated herself as usual opposite him to wait for him to begin their conversation. But this morning he didn't want to talk, he had nothing to say. It even seemed to him that she had somehow betrayed him. She had shown him how little his words meant to her, if in spite of everything he had said and shown himself to be she could still have brought him this tasteless, vulgar object. He knew he was being ridiculous but he couldn't help feeling it. He took the coffee from her, feigning an absent manner, and returned to his typewriter.

Honest with himself—he tried to be that—he admitted what had been in his mind. He had meant to make love to her. To what end? Was she to have been his Nora? He had never progressed so far, even in his thoughts. Simply he had thought of love and pleasure, of taking her about and giving her a good time. Was he mad? They were poles apart—a great gulf fixed between them, as she had proved by her gross misunderstanding of everything he was and stood for. Serve him right for having such aims and intents. It must be his subject who was taking him over, his poet, who at sixteen boasted to Frank Harris of getting his mother's kitchenmaid pregnant.

He nodded absently to her when, ready to leave, she put her head round the door. Peter phoned from Philadelphia not long after she had gone, and after he had talked to him Bernard felt better about things. He was able to make quite an amusing story out of the presenting of the peacock bookmark. And Peter commiserated with him, agreeing that there was no doubt about it, he would have to use the thing, and prominently, for the duration of his stay. Naturally, Bernard said nothing about his now vanished desire for Judy, any more than he did when he repeated the tale to Ann that night. Ann had the advantage over Peter in that she could actually be shown the object.

"It's copper," she said. "And it doesn't look mass-produced. It was probably quite expensive. But you can't actually use it, it's dreadful."

"I don't want to hurt her feelings."

"What about your feelings? Aren't they important? If you don't want to say straight out you can't bear the thing, tell her you've left it at home or you've lost it. Let me have it and I'll lose it for you . . ."

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Next day he followed her advice and left the bookmark at home. Judy didn't say anything about it, though it was her day for dusting the bedroom and he had left his notebook in the bedroom, lying face-downward on the stack of other books. She watered Peter's plants and cleaned the windows.

He didn't take a break from work when she brought his coffee, only looked up and thanked her. But he could see she had her eye on the books which covered half the dining table. He was sure she was looking for the peacock. He repeated his thanks in as dismissive a tone as he could manage and she turned at once and left the room. The sandwiches she left him for lunch were tinned salmon and cucumber with a strawberry yogurt and a chocolate bar. Bernard fancied the standard was less high than it had been.

It was a relief to be without her as he always was on Thursdays. On Friday her face was once more the way it had been that first week, one eye black and swollen, her cheek bruised, her mouth cut. But he said nothing about it. He could see her gazing at all the books on the table, and after she had left the room he went quietly to the door and through the crack watched her slowly move the stacked volumes to dust the surface of a cabinet. By now it must have registered with her that he disliked the bookmark and had no intention of using it. It was, of course, a mistake to be too friendly with these people, to put them on a level with oneself. He wasn't used to servants and that was the trouble. Who was, these days? Returning to work, he felt a flash of envy for his poet who, though comparatively poor, had nevertheless kept a man and two maids to look after him.

She spoke to him, as in the old days, when she brought his coffee. Tentatively, as if she thought him in a bad mood and she was placating him, she said, "I've been in the wars a bit."

He glanced up, took in once again that awful damaged eye. How could he once have thought her pretty? The notion came to him that she was trying to tell him something, appeal to him. Was she perhaps going to ask yet again if he liked the bookmark? He put up his eyebrows and made a rueful face. "Close the door after you, will you, Judy?"

Still, he had been wrong about the standard of lunch, having no fault to find with pastrami sandwiches, watercress salad, and a slice of pineapple. Ann's advice was sound. By not yielding, he had shown the woman that imposing her atrocious taste on him wasn't on. But he hadn't bargained for what happened on the Tuesday.

She didn't come.

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For a little while, when eleven was past and he was sure she wasn't coming, he felt awe at himself, at the stand he had taken. He had been strong and he had driven her away. Then he was pleased, he was relieved. Wasn't it absurd, a woman coming in three times a week to clean up after someone who didn't even sleep there, who scarcely ate there? Of course, she would probably come back when Peter returned in three weeks' time. It was he she was ostracizing. She had taken offense because he wouldn't give in to her and use her hideous gift.

He had worked himself up a bit over her defection by the time he got home. "She could at least have phoned and made some excuse."

"They don't," said Ann. "Those people don't."

Any qualms he might have had about Judy's turning up later were soon allayed. It was clear she wasn't coming back. Bernard got into the way of buying himself something for his lunch on his way to the flat. He went without coffee. It wasn't as if he was used to it, as if Ann had ever made it for him. He left his books lying about all over the floors, face-downward or with pieces of paper inserted between the pages. Of course he hadn't finished the life of his poet by the time Peter was due back, he wasn't even a quarter of his way through, but he had made such a good start he felt he could continue at home in spite of Jonathan and Jeremy, in spite of chaos and noise. He had broken the back of it.

Peter phoned the morning before he was due to leave New York. They talked about the weather, the heavy snowstorms which had been sweeping the East Coast of America. Then Peter said, "That was terrible about Judy."

A strong word to use, but Peter was inclined to be intense.

"How did you know?" Bernard said.

"I saw it in the paper, of course. I do make a point of seeing English newspapers while I'm here."

They were at cross-purposes. "What did you see in the paper?"

Peter sounded astonished. "That he killed her, of course. I shouldn't have been surprised, I used to tell her he'd do it one day. I told her to leave him, but she wouldn't. She must have talked to you about him, surely? I can't believe she came in all that time without a mark on her from what he was doing to her. They've charged him with murdering her. Don't you read your newspaper?"

He hadn't known her name, Bernard said, he hadn't known where she lived or anything about her.

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"What did you talk about? Didn't you ask?"

Bernard said goodbye and slowly let the receiver slide into its rest. What had they talked about, he and Judy? His work, English literature, books, his past career. He had talked and she had listened. Raptly, he thought now, her battered face lifted, her damaged eyes watching him. Why hadn't she said what happened to her at home? Why, instead of giving him that ridiculous tasteless thing, hadn't she thrown herself on his mercy, confided in him, offered herself to him?

He didn't say a word about it to Ann. "What happened to the peacock bookmark?" he asked instead.

"The children were playing with it and Jeremy kept putting it in his mouth, so I threw it out."

He wanted to hit her, he wanted to strike her in the face, and he clasped his hands together to keep himself from that.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

PASSING REMARK

by JOHN LARGE

If Sherlock Holmes should come to life,
The crime rate would decrease—
Indeed, if Holmes were on the scene
We wouldn't need police.

But then a problem would arise
If crime became passe—
The good old murder mystery
Might sadly pass away.

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

"Holy Slavko Vorkapich, what do I do about her?" cried Oliver (who was obsessed with old movies, old movie posters, old movie stars, and obscure film players). A meadowlark offered a suggestion, but it seemed to lose something in the translation. It was so isolated in this part of the woods—hardly anyone ever ventured into it this far. But he knew it well from childhood, exploring it with Abner Collins of the video store when they both made believe they were Iron Eyes Cody and Chief Thundercloud planning to ambush Smith Ballew.

The sweet memory brought on a fit of weeping. Oh, holy Louis Jean Heydt, where did it all go wrong?

Holy Gemini George Baxt's latest novel, Who's Next?, *will soon be out in paperback from International Polygonics . . .*

THE BURYING OF TREASURE

by GEORGE BAXT

"Treasure!"

The word rang through the basement, ricocheting from wall to wall, and bounded up the stairs into the kitchen, where it pummeled Prunella Overbite's eardrums. She shut her eyes in agony, bit a nonexistent bullet, and, instead of kneading the bread dough on the wooden slab, began slowly strangling it.

"Treasure!"

Oliver Overbite's voice was now tinged with annoyance, impatience, and petulance. After six years of childless and joyless marriage, Prunella should have been used to it, but she wasn't and she never would be. A mere five minutes earlier she had asked herself,

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Why did you marry this nonentity? What was it? Was it the fact that he was his widowed, terminally ill mother's sole heir? Was it his ever-widening tonsure that now served as a landing field for flies and mosquitoes? Was it his dear little paunch that reminded her of either Tweedledee or Tweedledum? Certainly it wasn't his obsession with old movies, old movie posters, old movie stars, and obscure film players whose names were known only to their descendants and Oliver.

"Holy Gustav Von Seyffertitz, Treasure, can't you *hear* me?"

"I hear you!" she shouted back. "Along with birds and dogs, I hear you!"

"Well, why didn't you answer me?"

"I just did." Prunella attacked the dough with a butcher knife.

"What took you so long?"

"I was searching for the right words."

"You've got to come down here right away!" The VCR was on Hold as he stared at the television screen and a frozen moment in cinema history.

"Why?" One would hardly describe her tone of voice as enthusiastic.

He was at fever-pitch. "I've found Kay Medford's movie debut!"

"Kay *who?*"

"Kay *Medford!*" He favored the ceiling with a look of exasperation. "Holy Etienne Girardot, she was Barbra Streisand's mother in *Funny Girl!*"

"Wow," commented Prunella listlessly.

"Aw, come on now, Treasure, you've got to see this!"

She pinned the butcher knife to the board, wiped her hands on a filthy towel, and walked slowly to the stairs leading down to the basement, a condemned woman without benefit of a priest.

The village of Twisted Spine was located in a still-unexplored section of North Dakota. The population was a little over three thousand and twenty and it was known for absolutely nothing. The Overbites had founded the village some two hundred years earlier and made the founding fortune trapping furs and slaying Indians. Oliver was the last of the Overbites and Prunella was hanging in there because she was his sole heir. Her mother hadn't liked Oliver one bit. Actually, nobody liked the Overbites much. There had been much intermarrying, which Prunella's mother, Gardenia Fleming, claimed resulted in bad bloodlines and Oliver's inability to father

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a child. (A doctor in Fargo had confirmed this with unbecoming relish. Prunella prudently refrained from suggesting that in order to sire a child one must indulge in occasional sex.) Gardenia was now dead and her sour comments were much missed by the Twisted Spine Sewing and Witchcraft Society.

Rich as he was, Oliver was the village joke. "Him and his old movies," snorted the mayor. "Who ever heard of Edwina Booth? And who cares?" Only Abner Collins, proprietor of the village's lone video-rental store, liked Oliver. It was Oliver who kept him in business, renting as many as six cassettes a day. The others rented maybe one a week, if that, and Abner had medical expenses because of his slightly backward teenage daughter, Lucinda.

Abner stared out the window of the tiny, cramped establishment which had once been his mother's front parlor and watched his love-smitten daughter dogging the footsteps of her idol, Lex Tarragon, a boy three years her senior.

"Don't you like me any more, Lex?" Lucinda pleaded in her squeaky Betty Boop voice.

"What makes you think I don't like you any more?" he asked, staring at the ground as he always did when he was out walking.

Lucinda twisted a dirty-blonde curl with her index finger as she skipped alongside him, polluting the air with dust. "You haven't told me once today about all the wonderful places you're going to take me when you're rich and wealthy and have money."

"Well, Lucinda," he said, choking on the dust storm she'd created, "I'm beginning to realize I just ain't ever gonna have that kind of money, that's all. Unless mebbe I suddenly strike it rich. But I don't much see that happening, either."

"Well, couldn't you maybe rob a bank?" suggested Lucinda, who was occasionally surprisingly practical.

"I couldn't right do that," countered Lex.

"Why not?"

"Becuz we only got one bank, and if I robbed it they'd recognize me."

She tortured another curl. "Silly—you could tie a handkerchief around your face. They'd be hard put to know you then!"

"And what do I do about my club foot? Everybody in town knows my club foot."

"You could wear galoshes."

"I don't own no galoshes."

Lucinda's shoulders slumped. She had run out of ideas. For an

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unworldly girl, she harbored many worldly desires. She wanted a husband and children and money and a ticket out of Twisted Spine. She wanted to be rid of her father and the villagers, who seemed to do nothing when they saw her but cluck their tongues and wag their heads sadly from side to side.

Prunella stood in the basement, arms folded, tapping her right foot with impatience while Oliver insisted she keep her eyes fixed on the TV set. He rewound the cassette a bit and then cried eagerly, "There she is! There she is getting off the bus! Holy Ferdinand Gottschalk, don't you recognize her? That's Kay Medford. It's the nineteen-forty-one Lana Turner movie, *Slightly Dangerous*. I'll run it again."

"Don't! Don't! I'm building up an immunity. I can't stand these damned old movies and these damned old movie stars—there's got to be more to living than this!" Imperiously and dramatically, her arm swept around the room. There were floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked with video cassettes, thousands of them—silents, early talkies, foreign films, famous films, infamous films, films of such obscurity that their featured players were long gone and probably never heard of even at the time the films were produced.

"I hate this room!"

"Aw, Treasure—"

"I hate your awful cassettes!"

"Aw, come on now, Treasure—"

"I hate your damn VCRs!" (He had seven.)

Oliver winced at the pain in his chest. To insult his VCRs was tantamount to stamping on the American flag. "Please, Treasure—"

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" she shrieked as she stomped back up to the kitchen, her cries falling on deaf ears as He was busy elsewhere.

Oliver said to himself, Holy Adeline DeWalt Reynolds, now what's gotten into her?

Prunella undid her apron, flung it across the batter, took a fifth of gin from the cupboard, and stormed out of the house. She crossed the road to her friend Charity Shorthaul, one of the village's most popular alcoholics.

"Treasure! Treasure!"

Treasure was deaf to the importunings.

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"Missus Overbite," cried Lex Tarragon as he and Lucinda came upon Prunella crossing the road, "your husband's calling fer yer."

"Holy Helen Twelvetrees," snapped Prunella, "so he is!" She kicked Charity's gate open, stomped up the path to the ramshackle cottage from which shingles hung like forlorn ornaments, stomped up the rotted stairs leading to the porch and across the rickety porch to the front door. She shoved the door open and shouted, "Charity? It's me, Prunella!"

"Hic," came from the kitchen. Prunella followed the sound and found Charity sitting on a wicker chair, her hands hanging listlessly at her sides and her head fallen forward. Prunella put her hand under Charity's chin, raised the woman's head, and stared at her blotched skin and glazed eyes. "Holy Lillian Roth," she whispered.

"That wasn't very nice of Missus Overbite, was it?" Lucinda asked Lex as she followed him on a path that led into the woods.

"What wasn't?"

"Her not thanking you for calling her attention to her husband."

"I don't think she likes him."

"My daddy likes him."

"Well, he should. If it wasn't fer Mr. Overbite, yer daddy'd have to close up shop."

She laughed. "Daddy says that, too. Well—" she kicked a small dead twig lying in her path "—I wish my daddy *would* have to close up shop. Then we'd have to move away from here to someplace exciting like Paris, England, or Berlin. Or Russia or Japan, maybe."

"What with? Yer daddy ain't got no money."

Lucinda tore at her filthy, matted curls with frustration and shrieked at the sky, "Ain't it just my luck not to know nobody what's got money? Oh, the world is so cruel!"

"It's also round," said Lex matter-of-factly.

"Holy Miliza Korjus, rhymes with gorgeous," murmured Oliver as he sat at the kitchen table, staring into a steaming cup of black coffee, "I don't think Treasure loves me any more. I see signs of violence in her."

When did it all begin? he wondered. What became of the loving, supportive, wide-eyed-with-wonder darling who sat with me for hours in front of the television set watching antique movies in our courting days? What became of the girl who squealed with delight

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when I told her I'd uncovered another oldie featuring Adia Kouznetzoff?

"Adia Kouznetzoff!" he remembered her gurgling at the time—and, my, how she could gurgle. "Wasn't he that Russian we saw in *Everybody Sing?*"

What became of the enthusiastic young thing who went crosseyed at the mere mention of Ethelreda Leopold? "Ethelreda Leopold! My favorite Busby Berkeley girl."

Oliver sat back in his chair, hands clasped, eyes brimming with tears. "Dear Lord," he implored the unseen deity, "when did the magic go out of our star-crossed lives?"

Charity Shorthaul held her glass of gin with trembling fingers.

"You want me to pour it into your mouth?" offered Prunella.

Charity managed enough facial muscles for a smile, revealing two beautiful rows of purple gums. "Never spilled a drop in my life."

"Charity, are you too drunk to understand what I'm saying?"

"Sure I know it's Saturday. You think I'm tanked or something?"

"I've got to get rid of him, Charity. What do you think?"

"I'm not sure if I'm voting for Lincoln or Douglas—they're both good men."

"He has heart problems. Do you suppose I could do something about that?"

"I wouldn't go to bed with Dennis Quaid if he offered me ten bucks."

Prunella sighed. "Have some more gin, Charity."

"Stop being so stingy with the gin!" Charity shouted.

"Daddy?"

"What is it, Lucinda dear?"

"Will we ever be rich enough to go traveling around the world? Lex won't marry me because he can't afford to take me around the world."

"Aw, honey bunny, Twisted Spine ain't all that bad."

Lucinda stamped around the room angrily. "It's rotten awful bad!"

"Now you stop that, honey bunny—!"

She puffed out her cheeks, folded her arms, and demanded of him, "Why does Mister Overbite call his wife Treasure?"

Her father sighed as he lied, "Because he thinks she's worth millions of dollars."

"Is she?"

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"Dunno. Mebbe."

"Hmmm," Lucinda subsided.

Oliver Overbite was walking in the woods. He was troubled and unhappy and had no one to talk to. He threw rocks at sparrows and hurled a dried branch at a rabbit, who sneered contemptuously as it hopped away. If he hadn't been so blinded by his VCRs, he would have recognized months ago that his marriage was in trouble. He had to face the truth about Prunella. She had duped him into thinking she loved him, duped him into getting him to propose to her, and all because she wanted to get her grimy paws on the Overbite fortune.

"Holy Slavko Vorkapich, what do I do about her?"

A meadowlark offered a suggestion, but it seemed to lose something in the translation. It was so isolated in this part of the woods—hardly anyone ever ventured into it this far. But he knew it well from childhood, exploring it with Abner Collins of the video store when they both made believe they were Iron Eyes Cody and Chief Thundercloud planning to ambush Smith Ballew.

The sweet memory brought on a fit of weeping. Oh, holy Louis Jean Heydt, where did it all go wrong?

The house was as silent as a movie house running the latest Burt Reynolds disaster. Prunella went to the kitchen and opened the door to the basement. "Ollie? Are you down there?" When there was no answer, her voice returned to its usual nasty, "Treasure is home." Silence.

She went down the stairs to the basement. There, she opened the door to the storeroom, where in addition to another few thousand movie cassettes was stored the gardening tools—the pickaxe, the shovel, the wheelbarrow. "Holy Charles Middleton, where are you, precious? I've come to tell you I'm getting out. I'm leaving. I've had it up to here." She ran a finger across her throat as she plucked a cassette from the shelf and read the neatly printed label:

1929. *Wonder of Women*, dir: Clarence Brown; stars: Lewis Stone, Leila Hyams, Peggy Wood—first version of Ingrid Bergman's *Intermezzo*.

"Well, fancy that!" screeched Prunella as she tore open the cassette and unwound the tape. Then she did the same to another cassette and another cassette and then another. She worked in a frenzy, not caring whether Oliver caught her or not . . .

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Lucinda tossed and turned in her bed, but sleep eluded her. She muttered a few choice epithets and decided to get up, get dressed, and take a long walk in the woods.

A few minutes later, as she stealthily left the house, she heard her father snoring. He'd never know she'd stolen away.

There was a full moon and suddenly, for the first time in weeks, she felt like singing. The woods at night never daunted her. There was nothing to be afraid of. She did sing as she skipped along the trail that led to her favorite spot, an area few people knew about or would even dare venture into in broad daylight, let alone the dead of night.

An owl hooted and a crow cawed and something slithered past her in the underbrush. Lucinda stopped singing and held her breath. She heard something that sounded like digging. Somebody else knew about this secret area!

Very cautiously, she edged her way behind a tree and peered about with curiosity. She heard a familiar voice cooing a bit unnaturally and decided to venture closer.

When she had seen and heard enough, she retraced her way out of the woods and hurried to the shack on the edge of town where Lex Tarragon lived with his mother and six brothers, all religious fanatics. Her heart was singing and her brain felt as though it might explode if she didn't calm down a bit. She had found it at last! She had found the means of leaving Twisted Spine forever and traveling around the world as Mrs. Lex Tarragon!

Knowing he slept in the basement next to the coal bin, she got down on her knees and tapped on the basement window. After a few agonizing minutes for both of them, Lex awakened and even through the filthy window pane recognized Lucinda's irregular features. Now what the hell, he wondered, as he went to the window and opened it.

He had never seen her in such a state of joyous agitation. "Get dressed and come with me! Hurry!"

"Are you crazy, girl? At this hour?"

"I know where there's buried treasure!"

"Ah g'wan! Yer plum crazy."

"No, I'm not—I seen it! Out in the woods—I seen it in the moonlight with my own eyes! I seen Mister Overbite burying Treasure!"

The sheriff was positive Oliver Overbite had gone right off his rocker. He had found him sitting in the basement in the middle of

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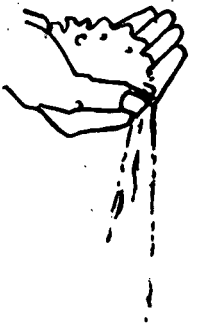
what looked like a whirlwind of unwound video tapes. He hoped Oliver would understand when he told him he was charging him with the murder of his wife.

"Prunella? You found Prunella? Why, I thought you'd never find Prunella. Bad, naughty Prunella. Well, well, well." He heaved a sigh and his eyes began to mist. "Holy Arthur Edwin Carewe."



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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES SALLIS

"I Saw Robert Johnson" will be the first story in a collection James Sallis is putting together titled How's Death? *Among his published books are* Jazz Guitars *and* The Guitar Players *(non-fiction from William Morrow & Co.) and* A Few Last Words *and* The Shores Beneath *(fiction from Macmillan and Avon). A book he is writing for Southern Illinois University Press about original paperback novels of the Fifties will focus closely and primarily on three writers—Chester Himes, Jim Thompson, and David Goodis.*

The Robert Johnson of the story title, in case you're not well acquainted with the blues, was a black singer, song writer, and guitarist who died at twenty-four in 1937—an enigma, a shy, hard-drinking womanizer reportedly poisoned by a jealous girl friend in a San Antonio hotel room . . .

I SAW ROBERT JOHNSON

by JAMES SALLIS

Let me explain.

I'm an insomniac, you see. Not the kind that has trouble getting to sleep, because three minutes after my head's down I'm out, but the kind that has trouble staying so: at two or half past three I'm up and wide-eyed, prowling around the efficiency like a werewolf.

So it was particularly surprising to wake this morning and discover it was already light outside—that I had slept the night through for the first time in many years. I lay listening to birds sing, the slam of doors across the street, a weather report from my neighbor's radio.

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I turned on my side and something leaf-light fell onto my lower lip. I touched it with a finger and the finger came away with a brownish smudge. I rubbed a palm against my cheek and that, too, came away reddish-brown. It was blood, old blood. I swung out of bed and stood in front of the mirror on the closet door nearby. My entire face was covered with it. Like the facials women get, like makeup base, like warpaint or a mask. There were spatters elsewhere—on my chest, legs, and feet—but mostly it was on my face. And a long line tracing the descent of breastbone to pudendum. My hands, apparently, had been washed clean.

Perhaps a few words concerning where I live now, and how I came to be here.

My wife—tolerant, compassionate being that she was—had finally told me to get it together or get out, and so I had, taking a garage apartment within walking distance of both my old house (for tradition's sake) and the university (which had an outstanding collection of old blues records). Across the street is a daycare center, and each morning I sit by the window watching shapely young women deliver their children, opera glasses which have known the soaring Valkyries and shared Carmen's pitiable death now focused on bouncing bosoms, long legs in high heels, and waggling buttocks. At a distance, every woman is erotic.

So many people fear being alone. But if you can't be alone, you can't know who you are. And this culture conspires to make such essential solitude impossible. Perhaps it fears the individual; certainly the individual has reason to fear *it*.

This place is a dump, one in which the blues records checked out from the university library seem quite at home. Turning off the lights at night, I can hear the roaches begin their peregrinations, dragging their spurred feet across Bessie Smith's "Empty Bed Blues," or mounting the minute summits of Lonnie Johnson's "Careless Love." I have cleaned and cleaned without result. The odor of mildew and carbon monoxide clings to every corner and crevice; spiders and crane-flies perch like dull thoughts on the walls.

There were on my body no cuts, no wounds to explain all this blood. And I had no memory of the night, only a vague remembrance of dreaming: trees with the face of my wife, mowed grass that spoke in the voice of my daughter, a parliament of fowls done up in tight skirts and unbuttoned shirtwaists.

The women had begun dropping off children, and I stood at the

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window, my face blood-smeared, wondering what would happen if they should see me. But they didn't.

Always first was the blonde with the pastel sweatsuits and tiny waist. Then the beautiful Latin girl with straight, crow-black hair falling almost to the back of her knees, always in skirt and jacket. Then the one with impossibly long legs, the ponytailed redhead who always looked so unhappy, the woman with short brown hair who always applied makeup in the rearview mirror before she pulled away. I recognized them all and couldn't step away from the window until they had come and gone. The prettiest of them all, though—a tiny Vietnamese woman, perfectly formed—did not come today.

I brewed a pot of tea and sat at the desk staring out into the yard and drinking the tea slowly, cup after cup. The powerful winds of recent days had at last blown themselves out and only a mild breeze remained. After a time I realized that the lizard I'd been watching run here and there was actually chasing birds. It would wait in the grass until the birds settled, then dash toward them, rippling silver in the sunlight, until they flushed and flew away. The lizard did this again and again, I have no idea why.

I won't turn on the radio, I thought. There will be horrible news. There is always horrible news. A tractor-trailer has plunged from an embankment, crushing a bus filled with schoolchildren. A man without food for a week has killed and eaten his neighbor's dog. A woman and daughter living in a house nearby were killed during the night, slashed in their beds. A young Vietnamese was found murdered in her apartment early this morning. That sort of thing. I will sit here and drink tea, at ease with the world, and then I will call them.

But there was no answer, as you know.

I had not realized so much time had passed, but soon the women began picking up their children and I stood as I had that morning, watching through the opera glasses. When they were all gone, I suddenly began to tremble. I got up and put on some Ma Rainey. I tried to imagine what it was like to be black in the Thirties, the rage and hatred you were always having to shove back down inside, again and again, until it finally bubbled to the surface in the blues. In the terrible ache that's become all I can feel now.

I put on some Son House, remembering the blonde woman moving underneath her clothes, a rhythm like the earth's itself, like the rise and fall of Son House's moan, like a lizard in the grass. I played the

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records one after another, some of them twice, and by then it was dark.

The drapes closed over my face in the glass, watching. I drew a hot bath and lay in it for a long time, adding hot water now and again by turning the tap with my toes. Then I splashed water onto my face and the blood began to come away, swirling out into the water like rust. I sat in the tub and watched it spin off into the drain.

After that I stood staring at the closed drapes. Behind them I could see the women moving around still, their breasts and hands brushing against the back of the drapes. I could see gin-soaked Bessie Smith bleeding to death on a Mississippi highway. I saw Robert Johnson huddled in a corner, his back to me, singing about his hellhound.

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a distinguished reprint by

CHESTER HIMES

From Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers: *"Himes, Chester (Bomar). American. Born in Jefferson City, Missouri, 19 July 1909. Educated at Glenville High School, Cleveland, graduated 1926; Ohio State University, 1926–28. Married 1) Jean Lucinda Johnson in 1937; 2) Lesley Packard. Imprisoned for armed robbery, Ohio State Penitentiary, 1928–36; worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Writers Project in Ohio, 1938–41. After 1953, lived in Europe. Recipient: Rosenwald Fellowship, 1944; Grand Prix de Litterature Policiere, 1958; Before Columbus Foundation Award, 1982. Died 12 November 1984."*

In his essay, "In America's Dark Heartland" in The Western Humanities Review, *James Sallis (see page 56) wrote of the sense one receives in Himes' work "of a vast pall of futility, a huge sea of inaction and impotence relieved by sudden islands of violent, random motion: the crushing weight of centuries." In the* Virginia Quarterly Review, *Raymond Nelson, referring to Himes' fictional Harlem police detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, said, "The residual portrait of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger outlined against the dull, lurid light of a criminal city, is one of the compelling images of our time."*

All too little of Chester Himes' work has been available in the United States. The most recent publications here have been the stunning special edition of A Case of Rape *published by Targ Editions in 1980;* My Life of Absurdity, *his autobiography published by Doubleday in 1976; and a collection of his fiction and nonfiction,* Black on Black, *also from Doubleday (1973). "Headwaiter," written in 1938, is in the latter collection. Himes worked as a busboy in Cleveland hotels after his student years at Ohio State and before his incarceration at Ohio State Penitentiary . . .*

"Q"

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HEADWAITER

by CHESTER HIMES

When headwaiter Dick Small pushed through the service hall into the main dining room, he ran smack into an early-dinner rush. The creased, careful smile adorning his brown face knotted slightly in self-reproach. He should have been there sooner.

For a brief instant he paused just inside the doorway, head cocked to one side as if deferentially listening. A hum of cultured voices engaged in leisurely conversation, the gentle clatter of silver on fine china, the slight scrape of a chair, the tinkle of ice in glasses, the aroma of hot coffee and savory, well cooked food, the sight of unhurried dining and hurried service blended into an atmosphere ineffably dear to his heart, for directing the services of this dining room in a commendable manner was the ultimate aim of his life and as much a part of him as the thin spot in his meticulously brushed hair or the habitual immaculateness of the tuxedos which draped his slight, spright frame.

But he could sense a hint of exasperation in the general mood with that surety of feeling which twenty years as headwaiter at the Park Manor Hotel had bestowed upon him, and his roving gaze searched quickly for flaws in the service inspiring it.

There was fat Mr. McLaughlin knuckling the table impatiently as he awaited—Dick was quite sure it was broiled lobster that Mr. McLaughlin was so impatiently awaiting. And Mrs. Shipley was frowning with displeasure at the dirty dishes claiming her elbow room as she endeavored to lean closer to her boon companion, Mrs. Hamilton, and impart in a theatrical whisper a choice morsel of spicy gossip—Dick had no doubt that it was both choice and spicy. When Mr. Lyons lifted his glass to take another sip of iced water, he found to his extreme annoyance that there was no more iced water to be sipped, and even from where he stood Dick could see Mr. Lyons' forbearance abruptly desert him.

The white-jacketed, black-bowed waiters showed a passable alacrity, he observed without censure, but they were accomplishing very little. Direction was lacking. The captain, black and slow, plodded hither and yon in a stew of indecision.

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Dick clapped his hands. "Fill those glasses for that deuce over there," he directed the busboy who had sprung to his side. "Take an ashstand to the party at that center table. Clear up those ladies." He left the busboy spinning in his tracks and turned to the captain, who came rushing over. "I'll take it over now, son. You slip into a white jacket and bring in Mr. McLaughlin's lobster."

His presence was established and the wrinkles of exasperation ironed smoothly out.

The captain nodded and flashed white teeth, relieved. He turned away, turned back. "Mr. Erskine has a party of six for seven-thirty. I gave it to Pat. Here's the bill of fare." He gave Dick a scrawled slip of paper.

Dick pocketed the order, aware that this party was something in the way of an event, for Mr. Erskine had been the very first of the older residents who had sworn they would never set foot within the dining room again until the "obnoxious"—Mr. Erskine himself had employed the term—syncopatings of "Sonny" Jenkins and his body-rocking "Cotton Pickers" had been everlastingly removed. His glance strayed involuntarily to the band dais at the rear where until just the day before Sonny and his black, foot-stomping troubadours had held forth. Deprived of their colorful appearance and cannonading rhythms, it had a skeletoned, abandoned look.

Well, after all it was the older residents like Mr. Erskine who comprised the firm foundation upon which the hotel so staunchly rested, he reflected, agreeing with them (although he would not have admitted it) that the noticeable absence of Sonny and his boys was more to be desired than their somewhat jarring presence. But he quickly pigeonholed the thought, the press of duty making no allowances for idle reflection. He went straight to the setup and scanned it quickly, his head to one side. After a moment's careful study, he leaned across the table and aligned a fork, smoothed an infinitesimal wrinkle from the linen, shifted the near candlestick just a bit to the left, then he rocked back on his heels and allowed his eyes to smile. He was pleased.

Flawless service for discriminating guests evoked in him a complete satisfaction. And who among the many to whom he had catered during his twenty years at the Park Manor had ever showed a finer sense of discrimination than Mr. Erskine, he thought. Or a broader sense of appreciation, he added with a glow.

He nodded commendation to Pat, tan and lanky, who was spooning

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ice cubes into the upturned glasses with slim, deft fingers, and Pat acknowledged it with his roguish smile.

"Here's the bill of fare, Pat," Dick said in his quick, crisp voice. "Put your cocktails on ice and have everything prepared by a quarter after seven." He glanced at the wall clock and noticed it was forty-seven minutes after six.

He stepped away, circled an unoccupied table, and came back, frowning slightly. "This is Mrs. Van Denter's table, Pat. Did the captain select it?"

"Cap called the desk, chief," Pat explained. "They said Mrs. Van Denter had gone to the country to spend a week with her sister."

"You know how stubborn she is," Dick said. "Been that way for twenty years to my knowledge, ever since her husband died and left her—" He caught himself and stopped abruptly. Gossiping with a waiter. Chagrin bit him lightly, putting snap into his voice. "Put your reserved card on, Pat. Always put your reserved card on first, then—"

The sight of Mrs. Van Denter coming through the entrance archway choked him. She made straight for her table, plowing aside everyone who got in her way. Tonight she looked slightly forbidding, her greyish, stoutish, sixtyish appearance rockier than ever and the tight seam of her mouth carrying an overload of obstinacy. At first glance he thought she had had a martini too many, but as she lumbered closer with her elephantine directness, he decided that it came from her heart, not her stomach.

Perhaps she and her sister had had a rift, he was thinking as he bowed with more than his customary deference and inquired as to her health. "And how are you this evening, Mrs. Van Denter?" After a pause in which she did not reply, he began his apology: "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Van Denter, but the captain was under the impression you were in the country—"

She brushed him aside and aimed her solid body for her table, on which Pat was just placing the reserved card. Dick turned quickly behind her, his mouth hanging slack. There was the hint of a race. But she won. And for all the iced glasses and party silver and crimped napkins and bowl of roses and engraved name cards at each plate, for all the big black-lettered card which read RESERVED staring up into her face, she reached for the nearest chair, pulled it out, planted her plump body into it with sickening finality, and reached for an iced glass.

Dick dropped a menu card before her and signaled Pat to take her

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order, his actions registering no more than a natural concern. He picked up the bowl of flowers and the reserved card and placed them on another table, then moved casually away. It was an era of change, he told himself. It made the old more stubborn and the young more reckless—he didn't know which were the more difficult to please. But here were Mrs. Hughes and her guest right beside him and she seemed to be pleased enough even if no one else was, he noted with obvious enjoyment of the fact.

"How do you do, Mrs. Hughes," he addressed the stately, white-haired lady. "And this is your sister, Mrs. Walpole, of Boston, I'm sure. We're delighted to have you with us again, Mrs. Walpole. I remember quite well when you visited us before."

Mrs. Hughes smiled cordially and Mrs. Walpole said, "I've been here several times before."

"But I was referring to your last visit, in August three years ago."

"What a remarkable memory," Mrs. Hughes murmured.

Dick was gratified. He prided himself on his memory, and when someone took notice of it he felt rewarded. Turning away, he caught his tuxedoed reflection in a paneled mirror and the slightly disturbing thought came to him that the blue and gold decorations of this dining room were too ornate for the casual informality that now existed. A vague regret threaded his thoughts as he recalled the bygone age when dressing for dinner had been the rigid rule. It took a slight effort to banish such recollections, and when he spoke again his voice was brusque.

"Clear that table," he ordered a busboy as if the busboy alone was to blame for the change of things.

Then a party of seven at a center table demanded his personal attention. "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Seedle," he greeted the elderly hosts, knowing that they considered the service lacking until he made his appearance. "And how is this young gentleman?" he inquired of their seven-year-old grandson.

"I'm all right, Dick," the boy replied, "but I ain't no gentleman—Gramma just said so."

"Arnold!" Mrs. Seedle rebuked.

"Why does Granpa eat onions, Dick?" the boy asked, not to be repressed. Dick bowed a smiling departure without replying.

"So Gramma can find him in the dark," he heard Mr. Seedle elucidate. Dick figured Gramma could very likely find him right then in the dark without the aid of onions.

"Fill these glasses," he directed a busy waiter, then filled them

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himself before the waiter had a chance to protest. "Pst," he called to a busboy. Receiving no reply, he hurried across the floor and shook the boy's shoulder. "What's the matter with you, are you deaf?" he demanded.

"No, sir. I—I—er—"

"Go get the salad tray," Dick snapped and hurried away in his loping walk to greet Mrs. Collar, eighty and cross, who hesitated undecidedly under the entrance archway.

"It's a rather nasty night, Mrs. Collar," he remarked by way of greeting, seating her in a corner nook. "It doesn't seem to be able to make up its mind whether to rain or sleet, but I feel it will clear up by tomorrow."

Mrs. Collar looked up at him over the rim of her ancient spectacles. "That isn't any encouragement to me," she replied in her harsh, unconciliatory voice.

Confusion took the smoothness out of Dick's speech. "I'm not really sure, er—I wouldn't be surprised if it continued, er—being indefinite."

"You're indefinite enough yourself," she snapped, scanning the menu.

He laughed deprecatingly, signaled to a youth less than a year out of prison to take her order. "I'd make a poor gambler," he confessed ruefully.

Her head jerked quickly up again. "You don't gamble, do you, Dick?" she asked sharply.

"No, Mrs. Collar, I do not gamble," said headwaiter Dick Small, gambling then his job at five hundred a month to give an ex-con another chance. "Nor do I employ any man who does."

"You couldn't tell if they did," she pointed out matter-of-factly. "Not unless you had every one of them shadowed night and day."

The indelibleness abandoned his smile. He turned away from her, annoyance tight in his throat, and greeted a sudden influx of diners. But before he had finished seating them, the indulgence came back to him. Mrs. Collar was really a very nice old lady, he admitted to himself, and he liked her. She was like olives, you had to acquire a taste for her. And he sincerely hoped she was pleased with the service. But, after all, she was just one diner, and he had neither the time nor the inclination to analyze her disposition, for the dining room was rapidly filling with younger and more demanding guests.

It was an unusual weekday crowd, and search his mind as he

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would he couldn't think of a reason for it. There were no conventions in town he knew of, and there were no more than the usual dinner specials. And then he had it, and he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. It was no more or less than the return of the dissenters, recalled by the serene and comfortable knowledge that Sonny Jenkins and his Cotton Pickers had no longer to be endured.

A repressed snort of laughter pushed air through his nose. But this was *no* laughing time, he censored himself. It was a time for smooth, fast service. His reputation as a headwaiter, and the prestige of the hotel itself, were dependent upon the guests being served with the least possible delay.

He started kitchenward to recruit more waiters from the room-service department, when something about a busboy halted him. He glanced down, looked up again.

"What kind of shoepolish do you use, son?" he inquired disarmingly.

"Paste," the boy replied, unthinking.

Dick let his gaze drop meaningfully to the boy's unshined shoes. "Try liquid next time," he suggested.

In the service hall, he bumped into a waiter gobbling a leftover steak and said pleasantly enough, "Food is like drink, son, it's a habit. There's no place in service for the glutton or the drunkard."

Over by the elevator where the room service was stationed, a waiter lounged indolently by a serviced table and yelled at the closed elevator doors, "Knock knock!"

Dick drew up quietly behind him, heard the slightly muffled reply from within the elevator, "Who's there?"

"Mr. Small, the headwaiter," he said crisply.

The waiter who had been leaning so indolently by the serviced table jumped. His hand flew up and knocked over a glass of water on the clean linen. The elevator doors popped open, emitting two more waiters in an impressive hurry.

"If you fellows don't care to work—" Dick began, unimpressed.

The first waiter hoisted the room-service table on his shoulder and started into the elevator without a word. The other two stammered in unison: "Yes, sir—no, sir—"

"Put down that table," Dick commanded the first waiter.

The waiter let it drop as if it was hot.

"All three of you go into the dining room and report to the captain," Dick ordered.

They scampered off.

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"Here, serve this dinner," Dick directed a busboy who had performed a magical appearance.

"But I don't know—"

"Find out," Dick snapped.

When he returned to the dining room, he noticed that patrons were still entering. He greeted an incoming couple, seated them, and took their order on notepaper, being unable to locate an idle waiter.

A bellboy passed through from the kitchen. Dick stopped him. "Give this order to Howard," he directed.

"But I'm a bellboy," the boy objected.

Dick stood stock still and looked at him. "All stages of existence have their drawbacks, son," he said in a lazy, philosophical vein.

The boy was not fooled. Mr. Small had a smooth way of telling a servant he was fired. He took the note and hurried away in search of Howard.

Dick's quick sight scanned the sidestand before he turned away, exploring for negligence. But the pitchers were filled and the butter was iced and the silver was neatly arranged in the drawers. He allowed a slight expression of commendation to come into his smile. The busboys whose duty it was to keep the sidestands in order had earned stars in their crowns—although they would never know it if they waited for Dick Small, headwaiter, to tell them.

Dick turned back to his guests, feeling a benign omnipotence in caring for their needs. He was as the captain of a ship, he reflected, the master of this dining room and solely responsible for its service. He seemed to derive a becoming dignity from the responsibility. These people were his passengers. He must feed and serve and humor them with an impartial respect. They were his life—they took up his time, his thoughts, his energy. He was interested in them, interested in their private lives and their individual prosperity. He knew them, knew about them. When they were pleased, he was pleased; when they were hurt, he was hurt; when they failed or prospered in their respective endeavors, it had a personal bearing on the course of his life. Each day when he stood looking over them, as now, he received some feeling which added to his life, although it seldom showed in the imperturbableness of his smile.

His gaze drifted slowly from face to face, reading feelings and emotions with an uncanny perception.

There were Tommy and Jackie Rightmire, the polo-playing twins

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with healthy appetites. Several tables distant he noticed their sister dining with a Spanish nobleman he had never been quite able to admire.

And there were Mr. Andrews and Mrs. Winnings—engaged, as was their custom of late, in animated chatter as they dined in the dubious seclusion of a rear column. Crowding forty, both of them, and as obviously in love with each other as a pair of doves. If the slightest censure threaded Dick's thoughts as his gaze moved slowly on, it didn't show in the bland smoothness of his expression. But he wondered what would happen if Mrs. Andrews, forty-two and showing it, and reputedly very jealous of Mr. Andrews' affections, should choose this dining room in which to dine some evening and inadvertently bump into one of their tete-a-tetes.

And coincidentally, as it happens even in masterpieces, Mrs. Andrews did. She came through the entrance archway at the front and beat a hard-heeled, determined path straight toward her spouse's table.

Dick's compelling thought was to deter catastrophe, for catastrophe it would be should Mrs. Andrews encounter Mr. Andrews in such an inexplicable predicament.

He headed her off just in time. "Right this way, Mrs. Andrews," he began, pulling a chair from a conspicuously placed center table.

"No, no, not that one—" she discarded it with a gesture. "I want something remote, quiet. I'm expecting a friend." Her eyes dared him to think no more than that which she had explicitly stated.

"Then this will be just the ticket for you," he purred, leading her smoothly to a table across the dining room from her husband and a seat with her back to him and the column between them.

"Thank you, this will be just fine." She smiled, pleased, and he had the feeling of a golfer who has just scored a hole in one.

The voice of a waiter stopped him as he moved away from her. "Chief, see that old man over there at the window? The one with the white goatee?"

Dick didn't look at the old man with the white goatee—he looked very pointedly at the waiter slouching with propped elbows on the sidestand.

"He says all a nigger needs is something to eat and someplace to sleep," the waiter continued, unaware of the pointedness of Dick's frown. "He says he knows 'cause he's got a plantation of them."

"Do *you* see that table over there from which Mrs. Van Denter is now arising?" Dick cut in, a forced restraint blunting his voice.

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"Yes, sir," the waiter replied quickly, sensing his mistake.

"Well, service it for six."

"Yes, *sir.*" The waiter was glad to be off.

Dick followed him over to Mrs. Van Denter's table and bowed to her again with that slightly exaggerated deference. "Was your dinner enjoyable, madam?" he inquired.

Dinner, enjoyable or not, had not softened the stone of Mrs. Van Denter's face. "Dick," she snapped, "I find your obsequiousness a bit repugnant." Then she plodded smilelessly away.

Dick admitted to himself with a sense of reproach that it had been a faux pas, but he couldn't take time to explore it further for he noticed that the table of two old women needed clearing and he went in search of a busboy.

The boy, a greenhorn, approached timidly from the rear of the thin, reedy lady with the lashing voice and reached around her for her plate, taking great care not to disturb her. The lady saw the stealthily reaching hand. "Oh!" she gasped.

The boy panicked. He grabbed the plate as if to dash away with it. The thin lady clutched the other rim and held on for dear life. There was a moment's tug of war. A chicken bone fell to the table. Then anger jerked the thin lady around in her chair. "Let loose!" she shrilled.

And let loose the now thoroughly frightened boy most certainly did. He jumped a full yard backward, his nostrils flaring like a winded horse's and his eyes white-rimmed in his black face.

"Always taking my plate before I'm finished!" the thin lady added.

But she had no further need to fear that particular boy taking her plate ever again, finished or not finished, for he didn't stop running until he was downstairs in the locker room changing into his street clothes. Dick sent the captain down to bring him back, but the boy had definitely resigned.

A stag party of four in the rear offered a brief respite from peevish old ladies and frightened busboys. Dick noticed that a raised window beside them slashed wind across their table and he hastened quickly in their direction, concern prodding him.

"Is there too much draft for you gentlemen?" he inquired solicitously, pausing in a half bow. But on closer observation, he saw that they were all strangers to him and slightly drunk.

They all stopped eating and ogled him. "That's a good-looking tux, boy," one remarked. "Where'd you get it? Steal it?"

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"No, sir, I purchased it," he said restrainedly.

"What makes you black?" another cut in. A laugh spurted.

Anger broke loose in him then. It shook him like a squall. But his smile weathered it. When the breath had softened in his lungs, he said politely, "God did, gentlemen," and moved away.

At a center table, a high-pressure voice was saying, "I just talked to the governor at the capitol. He said—" It sounded unreal to Dick. He turned his glance obliquely as the latecomer sat opposite his comely young wife. It was the wife who signed the checks, he recalled. And who was the woman he had seen him with the other day and had intended to remember?

But the sight of old Mr. Woodford standing in the entrance archway snapped his line of thought before Mnemosyne could come to his aid. He rushed to meet him. "And how are you this evening, Mr. Woodford, sir?" he asked, and then added without awaiting a reply, knowing there would be none, "Right this way, sir. I reserved your table for you." He had already noted that Mr. Woodford's table was unoccupied. He received Mr. Woodford's grudging nod and led the way rearward, recalling reluctantly the time when Mr. Woodford was genial and talkative and worth many millions. He was broke now, since the stock-market crash, and glum, with slightly bloodshot eyes—from drinking a little too much, Dick suspected.

When he turned away, he caught the beckoning finger of old Mrs. Miller, a resident for many years at the Park Manor and a special friend of the Rumanian countess who resided there on her visits to America. He moved quickly toward her, his smile becoming more genuine, less careful. "And when have you heard from our good friend, her Highness, Mrs. Miller?" he inquired with assured familiarity.

"I was just going to tell you, Dick," she replied in a reedy, year-thinned voice. "I had a cablegram from her daughter this afternoon."

"When is she going to pay us another visit? Soon, I hope."

"Never, Dick," she quavered. "She died last week."

Dick went rigid. The brown of his face tinged ashily. Then he noticed that Mrs. Miller's eyes were red and swollen from crying and he upbraided himself for not having noticed immediately.

He could find no suitable words for the moment. He pitied her in a sincere, personal way, for he knew that the countess was the one person in all the world she considered as a friend. But he couldn't express his pity. He was only a headwaiter. He thought there was

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something sublime in her gallantry that wouldn't let her grief prostrate her—and knew the countess would have wished it so.

Oddly, for a fleeting instant, he was a young black waiter in Atlantic City, thirty-six years ago. It was his afternoon off and he had seven dollars. The pretty brown girl beside him was saying, "I want the five-dollar one." It was a wedding ring, and she was to be his bride. Seven dollars. And now he was headwaiter at five hundred a month, with a seven-thousand-dollar home and a few thousand in the bank. That afternoon seemed a long way behind him. He said aloud, a sincere depth of feeling in his voice: "We shall miss her so much, Mrs. Miller. The world can little spare the loss of one so fine."

And by that sincere tribute to one who was dead, he earned for himself five thousand dollars in Mrs. Miller's will.

"Indeed we shall miss her, Dick," Mrs. Miller replied, barely able to stem the flow of tears.

When he moved away from her, his actions were slowed, groggy, as if he had taken a severe beating. In a very short time he would pass the sixty mark. Sixty was old for a waiter in a busy hotel. He shook himself as if he were waking from a bad dream and stepped forward with renewed pounce.

Perhaps he wasn't looking, perhaps he couldn't see. He bumped into a busboy with a loaded tray. China crashed on the tiled floor, silver rang. The sudden shatter shook the room. He patted the stooping boy on the shoulder—the unusual show of feeling leaving the boy slightly flustered—turned quickly away, head held high, refusing to notice the shattered crockery. And by his refusal to notice it, he averted attention.

The ringing of the telephone in the corner brought relief to his thoughts. He hurried over, picked up the receiver. "Dining room, the headwaiter speaking," he said. Faint traces of emotion still lingered in his eyes.

Behind him a woman's husky voice was saying, "But Mildred is selfish. No matter what you give in material things, my dear, unless you give something of yourself—" He recognized the voice as Mrs. Porter's, of Porter Paints and Varnish. The voice on the telephone began speaking and drew his attention.

He hooked the receiver, stuck a reserved sign on a table, and started kitchenward to get a glass of water when the question jerked him up short like the snap of a noose.

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"Boy, didn't you get a pardon from the penitentiary about a year back?"

The voices of the other three men and four women at the table stopped and hung rigidly suspended in an all-enveloping gasp. Motion froze as solid as the ice cubes tinkling in the glasses. Silence came in a tight clamp, restricting the breath.

But the waiter to whom the question had been addressed remained placid. "Yes, sir," he replied.

Dick turned toward the party.

"First degree?" the voice persisted.

A woman said, "Oh!"

"Yes, sir," the waiter repeated.

Dick entered the conversation then. "I engaged him, sir," he addressed the genial-faced man who had put the questions. "He's turned out to be one of my best boys, too."

"Why?" the man wanted to know, more from curiosity than reprobation. "I imagine that the residents of the hotel here would resent it if they knew. I might myself."

"I felt that he was a good boy and all he needed was another chance," Dick explained.

The man's eyes lingered a moment appraisingly on Dick's face, then switched to the waiter's. "Let's give it to him," he decided, closing the incident. Ease came back to the diners and the dinner moved serenely on. But the genial-faced man had earned Dick's everlasting gratefulness, although he would perhaps never know it.

The rush gradually subsided. Dick was made aware of it by the actions of his waiters. They had begun to move about with that languor which bespoke liberal tips. He was reminded of the Negro of Mark Twain legend who said he didn't want to make a dime 'cause he had a dime. His smile was indulgent. He knew his boys.

He counted twenty-one remaining diners. So he released the first shift of waiters with the ironic suggestion: "Don't disappoint your money, boys. Give it a break and spend it."

He watched their happy departure for a moment, knowing full well that they would be hanging over their favorite bars before the hour was passed, then his attention was drawn to a drunken party at a center table—overflow from the bar, no doubt. The coarseness of their speech and actions spread a personal humiliation within him. He wanted to feel that his guests deserved the respect he bestowed on them.

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Someone in the party made a risque remark and everyone laughed. Everyone except one woman. She was looking at the lobster in front of her with mouth-twitching nausea. Then horror came into her face. "It moved! It moved!" she cried, voice rising hysterically. "It moved!" She backed away from the table, crying over and over again, "It moved!"

Dick stepped quickly forward and whisked the platter of lobster from the table. "Is there something else you desire, madam?" he asked politely.

A man swung leisurely from his seat and winked at him. "She desires a bit of air, that's all," he said.

A waiter smothered a laugh in a napkin.

"Take that napkin from your face!" Dick chastened with a severe voice. "Get some side towels and use them, and don't ever let me catch you using a napkin in such a manner." His harshness was an outlet.

He moved toward the side windows, trying to stifle the buildup of emotion in the smoothness of his mind. The guests were always right and a waiter was always impersonal in action and in thought, no matter what occurred—that was the one rigid tenet in the waiter's code. But platitudes helped him very little. He decided that he must be tired.

George, tall and sepia, passed him. He noticed that George needed new tuxedo trousers, but he didn't say anything because he knew George had a woman who took most of his money. And George knew what a waiter needed, anyway. He'd give him enough rope—

He was surprised to see it was Mr. Upshaw George was serving. Mr. Upshaw had once said he didn't like "yellah niggers." Maybe Mr. Upshaw didn't consider George as being yellow.

He thought no more about it, for he had just noticed Mr. Spivat, half owner of the hotel, dining alone at a window table. He went over and spoke to him. "Nasty weather we're having, Mr. Spivat."

"Yes, it is, Dick," Mr. Spivat replied absently, scanning the stocks final.

The window behind Mr. Spivat drew Dick's gaze. He raised his sight into the dark night. Park foliage across the street was a thick blackness, looking slightly gummy in the wet sleet and rain. On a distant summit, the museum was a chiseled stone block in white light, hanging from the starless night by invisible strings. Street lights in the foreground showed a stone wall bordering the park, a strip of sidewalk, slushy pavement.

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A car turned the corner, its headlights stabbing into the darkness. Motor-purr sounded faintly as it passed and the red taillight bobbed lingeringly into the bog of distant darkness. Dick stared into the void after it, feeling very tired. He thought of a chicken farm in the country, where he could get off his feet. But he knew he would never be satisfied away from a dining room.

When he turned back, traces of weariness showed in the edges of his smile, making it ragged. But his eyes were as sharp as ever. They lingered a moment on the slightly hobbling figure of Bishop. A little stooped, Bishop was, a little paunched, and a little grey, with a moonface and soiled eyes and rough skin of midnight-blue. A good name, Bishop, a descriptive name, Dick thought with a half smile.

He noticed Bishop lurch once, so he followed him into the kitchen, overtook him at the pastry room, and spun him about, sniffing his breath. He caught the scent of mints and a very faint odor of alcohol.

"You haven't been drinking again, have you, Bishop?" he asked sharply. He liked Bishop, but Bishop would drink, and a drinking waiter could not be tolerated.

Bishop rolled his eyes and laughed to dispel such a horrid idea. "Nawsuh, chief. Been rubbin' my leg with rubbin' alcawl. Thass what you smell. My n'ritis is terrible bad, suh."

Dick nodded sympathetically. "You need to watch your diet, Bishop," he advised. "Go home when you serve that dessert."

Bishop bobbed, rubbing his hands together involuntarily. "Thank you, suh, Mistah Small."

Dick turned back into the dining room, followed by Bishop with coffee and cream. He stopped just inside the doorway, his gaze lingering on Bishop's limp.

But his frown was inspired by thoughts of his own wife more than by Bishop's limp. She was using an exceeding amount of money lately. He didn't want to start thinking unfair thoughts of her—that was the way so many marriages were broken up.

He caught himself and brought his mind back to the dining room. He tried to recall whether he had assigned Bishop to wait on Mr. Spivat. He certainly wouldn't have, he knew, had he known that Bishop was limping so badly, for Mr. Spivat was convinced, anyway, that all Negro waiters were drunkards, and Bishop did appear drunk.

It all happened so quickly that the picture was telescoped in his

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mind and his body started moving before thought directed its motions.

Bishop's right leg buckled as he placed the tiny pitcher of cream. He jackknifed forward on his knee. Cream flew in a thin sheet over the front of Mr. Spivat's dark-blue suit.

Mr. Spivat blanched, then ripened like a russet apple. Insensate fury jerked him erect. His foot pulled back as if to kick the kneeling figure, then froze in knotted restraint.

Dick was there in three swift strides, applying a cold damp towel to Mr. Spivat's suit. "Clean up, George," he directed the waiter, trying to avert the drama he felt engulfing them.

"Sorry, Mr. Spivat, sir. The boy's got neuritis—it's very bad during this nasty weather. I'll lay him off until it gets better."

But neither cold damp towels on Mr. Spivat's suit nor expressions of sorrow could allay the fury in his mind.

He mashed the words out between his clenched teeth. "Dick, see that this man gets his money, and if I ever see him in this hotel again I'll fire the whole bunch of you!" He wheeled and started walking jerkily from the room, his body moving as if it were being snatched along with slack strings. "Drunk!" he ground out.

Dick motioned Bishop from the dining room and followed behind. He had the checker make out a requisition for Bishop's pay, an even thirteen dollars. He couldn't meet the doglike plea of Bishop's eyes.

Bishop stood at a respectful distance, his shoulders drooping, his whole body sagging. Bishop had always liked Mr. Spivat, had liked serving him. He and Mr. Spivat used to discuss baseball during the summer months.

After a time he said irrelevantly, a slight protest in his voice, "I got seven kids."

Dick looked down at his feet—big feet they were, with broken arches from shouldering heavy trays on adamant concrete, big and flat and knotty. He felt in his pockets, discovered a twenty-dollar banknote. He pressed it into Bishop's hand.

Bishop said, "I wasn't drunk, chief."

Dick wanted to believe that, but he couldn't. Bishop as a rule didn't eat mints—he didn't like sweets of any kind. But mints would help kill the odor of whiskey on his breath. Dick sighed. He knew that Bishop liked serving Mr. Spivat. There was very little of the likes and dislikes of all his waiters, of their family affairs and per-

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sonal lives, that Dick didn't know. And of them all, he sympathized most with Bishop.

But what could he do? Bishop would drink.

He said, "Accidents will happen, son. Yours just cost you your job. If there's anything I can ever do for you, anything in reason, let me know. And even if it isn't in reason, come and let me say so."

He stood quite still for a moment. His face showed extreme weariness. Then he shook it all from his mind. It required a special effort. He blinked his eyes clear of the picture of a dejected black face, donned his creased, careful smile, and pushed through the service hall into the dining room. His head was cocked to one side as though he were deferentially listening.

"Q"

ON OUR COVER

Don Johnson, presently starring as Detective Sonny Crockett on NBC's *Miami Vice,* was born in Flat Creek, Missouri. When a high-school teacher there tossed him out of a business-administration course for sleeping in class, Johnson, needing one more class credit to graduate, chose drama and was given the male lead in *West Side Story*—which won him a rare full scholarship to the University of Kansas before he joined the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

After a year there, Sal Mineo cast Johnson in the play *Fortune and Men's Eyes.* After that, he made his feature-film debut in *The Magic Garden of Stanley Sweetheart.* In the early Seventies, he starred in the mini-series *The Rebels,* which he rates as his best work along with the TV movie, *Amateur Night at the Dixie Bar and Grill.* He co-starred in the series *From Here to Eternity* and the mini-series *The Long Hot Summer* (both NBC). His most recent feature films are *Dead Bang* and *Sweetheart's Dance.* He also has a million-selling record to his credit.

Besides music, songwriting, and fishing, his prime passion, his curriculum vitae says, is golf. He lives in Miami, Florida.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

At one time, a survey of Canadian mystery fiction would have been very short and not overly inspiring. Some famous names had either Canadian nationality or connections—John Buchan, Margaret Millar, Ross Macdonald—but, like Canadian actors, it seemed they had to leave home in order to gain recognition. But in recent years, the Canadian mystery has enjoyed more attention, led by such writers as Howard Engel, Ted Wood, and the Edgar-winning L. R. Wright. Below find the latest entry from one of the best Canadian series, the debut of an outstanding new writer, and the use of a Canadian background by one of the most celebrated British thriller writers.

**** Eric Wright: *A Question of Murder,* Scribners, $15.95. A van blows up along the route of a visiting British Princess, in Toronto for the running of the Queen's Plate. Wright beautifully balances series cop Charlie Salter's detective work, his professional relationships and conflicts, and his home life, this time centering on his son's ill-conceived efforts to practice amateur social work on his elderly grandfather—who doesn't need any help, thank you. The book is so low-key and effortlessly readable, it's easy to miss what a remarkable job it is.

*** Elisabeth Bowers: *Ladies' Night,* Seal Press, 3131 Western Avenue, Suite 410, Seattle, WA 98121-1028; $8.95. Vancouver private eye Meg Lacey may not be as capable an investigator as Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone or Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, being less tough and more naive, but as a convincing and likeable fictional creation, she belongs in their company. Her first case deftly handles a troubling subject, the sexual exploitation of teenage runaways. If the ending of this well written and strongly feminist novel doesn't quite pull together all the loose ends, in context it is both appropriate and satisfactory.

*** Dick Francis: *The Edge,* Putnam, $18.95. Tor Kelsey, undercover man for the British Jockey Club, joins an unlikely train trip across Canada, combining a racing tour for owners *and* their horses with a staged murder game (a fresh variation on a recently overused background). Lesser Francis but still completely enjoyable, demonstrating what a reliable entertainer the former jockey is.

**** Bill Pronzini: *Small Felonies,* St. Martin's, $15.95. One of the masters presents fifty short-short stories (here defined as 2,000 words or less), nine from *EQMM,* eighteen from *AHMM,* fifteen from other periodicals and original anthologies, and eight new. The variety is as impressive as the craftsmanship: while the O. Henry-type twist story predominates, there

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are several pure detective tales (three involving "Nameless"), horror stories, and a western. Any number of gems keep company with only one outright dud (the previously unpublished "Outrageous," which might have been called "Unconscionable"). Several of Pronzini's many collaborators appear: Jeffrey M. Wallman five times, Michael Kurland, Marcia Muller, and John Lutz once each.

**** James Ellroy: *The Big Nowhere,* Mysterious Press, $17.95. In 1950 Los Angeles, three oddly assorted investigators (a sheriff's deputy obsessed with finding a bloodthirsty serial killer, a D.A.'s man who most wants to get custody of his adopted son, and a pragmatic trouble-shooter for Howard Hughes) become involved in a labyrinthine plot centered on the hunt for Communists in Hollywood. Ellroy's unstintingly dark world view and penchant for nauseatingly detailed violence place him beyond the pale for some readers, but for those who can take it, his is one of the most powerful and individual voices in the field today. (He commits at least one anachronism, however: in 1950, there was no educational institution in Southern California known as "Cal State.")

*** Jonathan Gash: *Jade Woman,* St. Martin's, $17.95. Even if you join me in that minority of mystery readers who have never been able to warm up to comic rogue antique dealer (and faker) Lovejoy, you might try this one anyway. The extraordinarily detailed and vivid depiction of Hong Kong makes it the ultimate travelogue mystery.

*** Walter Walker: *The Immediate Prospect of Being Hanged,* Viking, $17.95. Murder strikes among the old families of Woodedge, Massachusetts, and heading the D.A.'s investigation is Patterson Starbuck, a distant relative of the local nobility with reason to resent them. This is a well told story with good investigative and courtroom action to balance the shortage of sympathetic characters.

*** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *A Cold Red Sunrise,* Scribners, $15.95. In his fifth case, Moscow cop Porfiry Petrovich Rostnikov is sent to Siberia (temporarily) to investigate the murder of a fellow policeman who was looking into the death of a celebrated dissident's young daughter. Kaminsky is best known for the Hollywood private-eye novels about Toby Peters, but the Rostnikov series seems to me a greater contribution to detective fiction.

** Carolyn G. Hart: *Honeymoon with Murder,* Bantam, $3.50. Annie Laurence, proprietor of the Murder on Demand mystery bookstore, finds her honeymoon with detective Max Darling delayed when a local slimeball is murdered and a store employee vanishes. This is a pure whodunit in the classical style, complete with maps (three), periodic lists (of suspects, questions, hypotheses), fairly planted with clues, and a gathering-of-the suspects finale. It would be better shorter, with some of the literally hundreds of mystery-fiction references (classic and contemporary, famous and obscure) among the material pruned back.

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** Orania Papazoglou: *Rich, Radiant Slaughter,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $12.95. The author's fourth account of murder among the romance writers (featuring bestselling true-crime writer Patience McKenna) has some pointed satire and well drawn characters inhabiting a very unlikely story that loses impetus midway. (Papazoglou carries to a new extreme the use of real-life mystery personalities as characters: Gail Larson of Baltimore's Butler Did It bookstore is not just a bit player but a full-blown suspect.)

For some of the finest pure detective puzzles ever committed to print, seek out a chubby trade paperback called *The Ellery Queen Omnibus* (International Polygonics, $9.95), comprised of *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* (1934) and *The New Adventures of Ellery Queen* (1940). The former includes "The Adventure of the Glass-Domed Clock," an elaborate dying-message tale that is my favorite Queen short; and the latter has the short novel, "The Lamp of God," one of the finest impossible-crime stories.

The early novels of Queen contemporary Stuart Palmer have long been difficult to find. His second Hildegarde Withers novel, *Murder on Wheels* (1932), with an elaborate and unlikely plot typical of its era and an evocative picture of Depression Manhattan, turns up in the anthology *Lady on the Case* (Bonanza, $8.95), edited by Marcia Muller, Bill Pronzini, and Martin H. Greenberg. Twenty-one other female sleuths appear in shorter cases. This is a hardcover anthology of the "instant remainder" variety and can be found in the bargain sections of many bookstores.

Other reprints (in reverse order by date): 1988, Peter Lovesey's *Bertie and the Tinman* (Mysterious Press, $3.95), a Victorian whodunit in which the Prince of Wales personally describes his investigation of the death of jockey Fred Archer. 1987, a fine entry from Ed McBain's 87th Precinct series, the Hallowe'en-centered *Tricks* (Avon, $3.95); Pamela West's *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper* (Dell, $3.95), one of the best fictional recreations of the Whitechapel mystery, lacking only a fresh solution; and Jonathan Valin's *Fire Lake* (Dell, $3.50), a strong Harry Stoner novel from one of the best private-eye series going. 1949, Fredric Brown's *The Screaming Mimi* (Carroll & Graf, $3.50), notable serial-killer story from a time when such figures were rarer than they are today, both in fiction and in life, and Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (Collier/Macmillan, $3.95), her masterful modernization of the Eighteenth Century Elizabeth Canning kidnap case.

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Are you the leader of the pilgrimage?" Michael asked.

"I seem to be." The man was in his thirties, with thinning hair and a hawklike face. "The Orthodox priest who was guiding us had to turn back the first day because of ill health. A few others went with him, but the rest of us are going on."

"How many are there?"

Marc Landau glanced back, as if expecting them to appear over the crest of the hill at any moment. "Eighty-one at last count. We will lose more before we reach our destination . . ."

THE GYPSY AND THE PILGRIMS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was Michael Vlado's close friend, Captain Segar, who first brought him news of the strange pilgrimage that would pass through the mountain village of Gravita. "They're an odd Christian sect," Segar explained, standing by his official car while Michael finished grooming one of his horses, "on their way to the Holy Land, where they hope to bring peace between the various Arab and Jewish factions."

"And they're coming this way?" Michael asked. He completed the grooming and released the chestnut stallion to run with the others. "How many are there?"

"Barely one hundred. They started in Latvia and plan to travel through Turkey and Syria to Lebanon, and then on to Israel. If they're not all dead by that time."

"How are they traveling?"

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"Mainly by horseback and wagon. The leaders are in two small vans. They should pass through here late tomorrow and will probably decide to camp overnight not too far from here."

Michael nodded. "I thank you for driving up to tell me, Captain."

"You're the king of your tribe now, Michael. You must be prepared for these things."

"We have always greeted visitors with hospitality."

"I'll plan to be back here again," Captain Segar promised, "to make certain there's no trouble while they're in the area."

Michael waved goodbye and walked toward the house to tell his wife Rosanna of the forthcoming visitors. It was only then that he began to wonder about Segar's words. Why should there be any trouble with a band of Christian pilgrims bound for the Holy Land?

Rosanna was at her worktable, carving the little wooden animals she liked to sell at the village shops. She listened to his account of the pilgrims and decided the travelers should be greeted with food and festivities. "We should give them a true Gypsy welcome."

Michael was dubious. "They are religious zealots, Rosanna. No doubt they would rather fast and pray than sing and dance."

"We shall see. The Crusaders went off to the Holy Land, too, and I remember what I read of their journey."

"These are not Crusaders—they are pilgrims," he reminded her.

Still, by the following afternoon her enthusiasm had proven infectious. Tables had been set up in a large field near the road and a large hand-painted sign carried the greeting Welcome Pilgrims in both Romanian and Russian. The leading van drove into sight by midafternoon, somewhat earlier than expected. It stopped when the driver saw the sign and one of the passengers emerged. Michael was summoned from his stable to greet the man, who spoke passable Romanian and introduced himself as Marc Landau.

"Are you the leader of the pilgrimage?" Michael asked.

"I seem to be." The man was in his thirties, with thinning hair and a hawklike face. "The Orthodox priest who was guiding us had to turn back the first day because of ill health. A few others went with him, but the rest of us are going on."

"How many are there?"

Marc Landau glanced back, as if expecting them to appear over the crest of the hill at any moment. "Eighty-one at last count. We will lose more before we reach our destination."

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"Here they come!" a Gypsy named Carnavitch shouted from the top of the rise. "Horses and wagons!"

"No second van?" Michael asked.

Landau frowned at him. "Your source of information is good. The second van turned back with the priest and some others. How did you know about it—and about us?"

Michael saw no point in vague half truths. "Captain Segar of the government militia drove up yesterday to tell us."

"So they watch us even now," Landau mused. Then the rest of the pilgrims joined them and there was no time for further talk.

Rosanna's people had done their job well. There was food for everyone, especially tempting vegetables freshly picked from the summer gardens. The eighty-one travelers seemed a mixed lot, mainly adult men and women but with a sprinkling of children, too. There were some elderly people as well, and when Michael looked into their eyes he thought they could see death waiting at their journey's end.

One of the pilgrim women who had ridden in the van with Landau came over to speak with Michael. "This is the kindest greeting we've had on the trip so far."

"Good. What is your name?"

"Svetlana Tellin." She was a stout, pretty woman with a youthful face and a memorable smile. "Are you all Gypsies here?"

"Yes, we are."

"Do you not travel in caravans?"

"No, we live here and farm our land and raise horses."

"I feel like a Gypsy myself on this journey. I should never have agreed to it." The smile faded, and Michael wondered why she had chosen him for this confidence.

"Why did you agree?"

"The priest asked me—Father Joseph."

"Is he Russian Orthodox?"

She laughed. "Nothing so common. Have you ever heard of the Golden Virgin?"

"I'm afraid not."

"These people are believers. I was one, too. Now I fear we are all going to our death."

"Lebanon is a dangerous place these days."

"I am not talking about Lebanon. I doubt if we will ever be allowed to leave the area of Communist control."

"They allowed you to leave Russia."

"Yes, and they may even allow us to cross Romania and enter

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Bulgaria. But the step from Bulgaria into Turkey is the crucial one, because it will put us out of their control."

"Why would—?" Michael started to ask, but he was interrupted by the arrival of Captain Segar. He seemed disturbed that the pilgrims had chosen to pause in Gravita.

"Michael, what is all this?" he asked.

Michael waited until Svetlana moved away and then said, "Rosanna felt there should be a proper Gypsy greeting for the travelers."

Segar glanced impatiently at his watch. "I had hoped they'd be clear of my area before nightfall. Let them camp in someone else's jurisdiction."

"Captain, what bothers you so much about these pilgrims?"

"They're in danger," Segar said simply.

"Because they want to flee from Socialist domination?"

"They were granted exit visas for travel purposes. The Soviets made no attempt to stop them."

Michael thought of what Svetlana had said. "Someone might still stop them before they reach Turkey, is that what you're thinking?"

"I'm thinking they are on a foolhardy mission. Light planes have been observing their progress from the air."

"Government planes?"

"Not our government. What do you know about the Golden Virgin, Michael?"

"That woman I was speaking with mentioned it, but she didn't explain what it was."

"It's a small statue of the Virgin Mary cast in solid gold. It was in one of their churches back in Latvia."

"Surely they don't have it with them!"

"I believe they have," Segar said. "They think that if the statue is transported to the Holy Land it will somehow bring peace."

"The priest must have it," Michael decided. "The ill priest who had to turn back. He would have taken the statue back with him."

But Captain Segar merely shook his head. "That is what someone else thought. The other van was found two days ago on a back road near the Soviet border. The priest and everyone in it had been murdered."

While the others in the party of pilgrims feasted, Michael was quick to notice that one man never left the van. Svetlana brought him some fresh fruit and a glass of wine which he ate and drank while turned sideways in the front seat with the passenger door

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open. Michael started to wonder if Segar might be correct about the van's valuable contents.

He walked over and introduced himself. The man in the front seat didn't understand Romanian, so Michael switched to Russian. He replied that his name was Leo Kaskar. "From Utena," he said, referring to a town in western Russia.

"Come and join the others in the field," Michael suggested.

"No, no—I stay by the van."

He was a heavy-set, muscular man with a short black beard, and if he was guarding the golden statue he looked as if he could do a good job of it. But before Michael could learn anything more, he heard Captain Segar shouting his name. Something was wrong. He broke into a run and covered the ground like a sprinter, seeing ahead two men locked in combat among the tables. As he drew nearer, he saw that one was Carnavitch and the other was the pilgrim, Marc Landau. He yanked Carnavitch away from the man and threw him to the ground. "What goes on here?" he demanded, addressing the Gypsy rather than their visitor.

When Carnavitch did not answer immediately, Landau did. "Your people are telling fortunes! That is against our religion. When I tried to stop it, this man attacked me."

"Is that true, Carnavitch?"

The Gypsy hung his head. "He took Marta's tarot deck and threw it across the field." Marta was Carnavitch's wife, much loved by him. Michael had once seen him almost kill a man who insulted her. He looked around for Marta, who had gone to retrieve her cards. She was tall and slender for a Gypsy woman, taller even than her husband, and easy to spot.

"What happened, Marta?" Michael asked her when she returned with the cards, trying to wipe them clean.

"I had the deck and some of the young girls wanted their fortunes told. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"There is in our church," Landau insisted. "If Father Joseph were here, he'd have overturned these tables as the Lord did with the moneychangers."

Michael glanced at Segar. It suddenly occurred to him that these people didn't know their priest and the others had been killed. He was not about to break the news to them. "Get out of here," he told Carnavitch and Marta. "We want no more trouble here."

They retreated toward their house near the ravine and Michael

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tried to apologize to Landau. "We have our customs as you have yours. I'm sorry it became a matter of conflict between us."

"I am sorry, too," Landau said. "You have treated us well, Gypsy."

A while later, Captain Segar drew Michael aside. "The hour grows late. They're planning to spend the night here with their horses and wagons and van."

"It's no inconvenience to us. They may camp in the field if they wish."

"The people who fly overhead are on their trail. They may come at any time."

"I've heard no planes," Michael insisted.

"I tell you as a friend, send them on their way."

"I cannot. That is not the way of the Gypsy."

And so the pilgrims stayed the night, putting up their little tents in the field. Much later, as he slipped into the bed beside Rosanna, Michael thought he heard the sound of a small aircraft cruising the night sky overhead.

Rosanna usually awoke before dawn and rose at once to make breakfast. Michael was a bit slower to rise, but he was always up and bathed before his wife had the food on the table. This morning, as she put the eggs on his plate, she said, "That could have been me with the tarot cards yesterday."

Michael, still adjusting the crimson Russian-style tunic he'd decided to wear that day, gave her a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"They were my cards. I'd taken them out there. Marta asked to borrow them because she thought it would be fun to tell the girls' fortunes. It was such a harmless thing."

"We must remember that these visitors do not follow the Gypsy ways. Fortune-telling is against their religion."

There was a pounding on the front door. "Who comes calling at six o'clock in the morning?" Rosanna wondered.

Michael went to see. Standing outside the door was Svetlana Tellin, looking distraught. "Come quickly! Something terrible has happened!"

Michael followed her at a run, not knowing what to expect. He could see Marta Carnavitch already hanging sheets outside her house, and some of the other families were stirring as well. But most of the pilgrims seemed still asleep in their tents. The first of them he saw was Marc Landau, and the sight of the sleeping pilgrirm leader was a relief. His first thought when Svetlana appeared at the

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door was that something had happened to Landau as a result of last evening's skirmish.

Svetlana shouted something to Landau in Russian, too quickly for Michael to catch it all—something about the Virgin and a killing. She kept running, with Michael just behind her, and as they topped the ridge by the road he could see the van parked as it had been the night before. Only now the burly pilgrim, Kaskar, lay sprawled by it in the road. He had bled from a chest wound and there was no doubt he was dead.

"When did this happen?" Michael asked.

"In the nighttime," Svetlana told him. "He slept in the van. I was nearby in a tent, but I heard nothing. I came out just now and found him dead."

Landau, well awake now, had reached them, but for the moment he ignored the murdered man and wrenched open the rear doors of the van. Then he came back to where Svetlana stood. "You're right," he said in Russian, speaking more slowly than she had. "It's gone."

"It's time you told me what this is all about," Michael said. "Was there something valuable in that van?"

Marc Landau was silent for a moment. Finally he seemed to decide there was no need to protect his treasure further. "A four-foot golden image of the Virgin, with a crown of diamonds upon her head."

"You think it was a Gypsy who killed him and stole it?"

"Who else?" Landau asked.

"Our houses and barns can be searched. But only if your own wagons are likewise searched."

"We will do that," the leader of the pilgrimage agreed.

"Meanwhile the authorities must be notified of this crime."

"Who would that be?"

"Captain Segar of the militia. You met him yesterday."

As the search got under way, led by Landau and Svetlana, Michael placed the phonecall to Segar. The captain was concerned but not really surprised. "We had a report of a small plane landing in a field a few miles from you after sundown. I sent men to investigate, but I've heard nothing from them yet. They may have located the plane and are keeping it under surveillance."

"Keep me informed," Michael said. "How soon can I expect you?"

"I'm leaving now. If I drive fast, you'll see me in less than an hour."

Michael spent the next hour accompanying the pilgrims on their

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search. It seemed that they looked everywhere—in haystacks and corn cribs and even down the well at Michael's own house. He even saw Landau look under the carpets in some living rooms, perhaps seeking trap doors to basement storage areas. By the time Captain Segar and his men arrived, the search was all but complete and no trace of the golden image had been found.

"It took me longer than I expected," Segar explained. "The men I sent up here last night located the plane. They have it under observation. My assistants can deal with the body. I'm going back there. Do you wish to accompany me?"

"Of course," Michael said.

They sped over the rutted mountain roads, covering five kilometers in as many minutes. "The pilgrims suspect your people of the crime?" Segar asked.

"Of course. Gypsies are always the first suspects. There was trouble yesterday even before the murder." He told Segar of the fight over the tarot cards.

"Here we are," Segar said, slowing down and pulling off the road under a sheltering tree with drooping limbs. "We go the rest of the way on foot."

Presently they came within sight of an unused field, narrow but long. At the far end Michael could see a small private plane reflecting the morning sunlight. A man, crouched all but unseen in the tall grass, watched the aircraft through binoculars. "Anything yet, Igor?" the captain asked.

"No sign of anyone, sir. It was misty earlier. Now that they can take off safely, they might appear."

Michael settled down in the grass with the others. They'd been there less than fifteen minutes when suddenly two men broke from the cover of the trees opposite and ran for the plane. "Come on!" Segar shouted.

To Michael's surprise, a half dozen men emerged from the grass and the nearby woods, all moving in quickly on the plane. They reached it just as the engine sprang to life. One of the men gave up without a struggle, but the other—a swarthy fellow with a pockmarked face—came out the door like a bullet, bowling over Captain Segar and waving a deadly looking pistol with a silencer attached.

Michael tackled the man at the knees, more in self-defense than for any other reason. They rolled over together in the grassy field, wrestling for the gun. Then Segar was on top of the swarthy man and the fight was over almost before it had begun.

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"Take them back to the car for questioning," Segar ordered. He turned to Michael. "We may have caught the killers in record time."

"If they did it, where's the golden statue?"

"They will tell us," Segar said confidently.

Once back in the car, it was quickly established that one man was merely the pilot. He had been hired to fly to this area of Transylvania and ask no questions. The other, the swarthy one, announced that his name was Gustave Germain and demanded to be taken to the East German embassy in Bucharest. That was all he would say.

"I know you're after the golden statue," Segar told him.

"Statue?" I know nothing of any statue."

"The Golden Virgin?"

Germain's eyes flickered. "Take me to my embassy."

The stolen image was not in the plane, nor in the woods near the point where the two men had fled. "They wouldn't have left it in the woods where anyone could find it," Michael argued. "Not after killing for it."

"What are you saying?" Captain Segar demanded. His patience was wearing thin, even with his friend.

Out of earshot of the prisoners, Michael explained. "I don't think they're guilty, Captain. Germain was carrying a silenced pistol. Why not use that to kill Kaskar rather than a knife?"

"Perhaps the pilot isn't as innocent as he pretends. He might have been carrying the knife and then threw it away after the murder." Segar seemed to like the theory. Presently he ordered the pilot taken from the car for separate questioning.

The man was a Swiss national employed by a flying school in southern Poland. He admitted he'd been involved in some shady operations in the past, but denied any knowledge of Gustave Germain's mission. Germain had a map showing the pilgrims' route and he'd told the pilot exactly where he wanted to land. The pilot insisted he'd waited in the woods through the night for Germain's return.

"Did he have a large statue with him?" Michael asked.

"No. He had nothing."

Segar turned the pilot over to his men in the other car with orders to take him back to the city. Germain was placed in Segar's own car, handcuffed and with a guard. As they drove him back to the scene of the killing, Segar remarked, "This was a long distance to walk in the dark. I suppose you followed the road."

Germain said nothing.

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"Your plane flew over us last night," Michael said. "You would have seen where they were camped."

Germain remained silent.

Presently they reached Gravita and the road on which the pilgrim had been slain. Landau and his people still stood in small groups, discussing the tragedy in muted voices. Svetlana Tellin was with them. When she saw the car, Svetlana came running to it as it pulled to a stop. When she saw the handcuffed prisoner in the back seat, she immediately asked, "Did you find the Golden Virgin?"

Segar shook his head. "This one won't talk. He's an East German named Gustave Germain. Does the name mean anything to you?"

"No. They might have hired anyone to follow us and steal it."

"*Who* might have?" the captain asked.

"The government. They didn't want a valuable work of art leaving the country, but couldn't have the bad publicity of taking direct action to stop us. This is a religious pilgrimage, after all."

And a doomed one, Michael decided. "I must speak with my people," he said.

It was then that Svetlana surprised him by asking, "May I accompany you—at least as far as the Carnavitch farm? I want to apologize for what happened yesterday with the tarot deck. We must respect each other's ways or there is no hope for any of us."

"Thank you," Michael said, and they started off together.

"Tell me about your group," he suggested. "What do you hope to accomplish at the end of your journey?"

"We are an offshoot of the Russian Orthodox Church," she explained, her warm smile seeming to reflect the morning sun. "Father Joseph has the idea that plain people like ourselves can make a difference, and that a pilgrimage to the Middle East and its publicity might be enough to silence the guns."

"A foolish thought?" Michael suggested.

"We will never know until we try."

"You've come only this far and several are dead already."

She gave him a sharp, troubled look. "What are you saying? Only Kaskar is dead."

Michael remembered that she knew nothing of Father Joseph and the others. He decided to leave it that way. "I misspoke. Here we are at Carnavitch's house."

Marta Carnavitch was in the yard, checking the sheets that were drying slowly in the motionless air. She frowned at Svetlana and

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backed away, but the pilgrim's first words reassured her. "I come in peace, to apologize on behalf of the others for the trouble yesterday. It seems now, with our larger problems, that it was quite unimportant, but I know it mattered to your people."

"It—it's all right," Marta stammered.

Carnavitch himself had appeared in the doorway of the house, hesitating at the sight of Svetlana. Finally deciding that a further defense of his wife was unnecessary, he came forward slowly. "We hold no grudge," he told the woman. "And we're sorry for your tragedy this morning."

"We do not blame the Gypsies for what has happened," Svetlana assured them both. "That man Germain is the killer, sent by the government to steal our treasure."

"He will be punished," Michael assured her, "if he's guilty."

"Can there be any doubt?" Svetlana asked.

"The golden image hasn't been found," he said. "Until it is, there must be doubt."

Michael went on to speak with the others, all of whom awaited word on the morning's events. It was nearly noon when Captain Segar found him going over some papers in the chambers of the informal Gypsy court, or *kris*, over which he presided. "We have completed our investigation here. We're returning to the city with our prisoner."

Michael put down his papers. "He has still not confessed?"

"No, but I have been notified that the pilot is talking. He admits being present when Germain murdered Father Joseph and the others. And the weapon used in those killings is the same caliber as the one Germain was carrying when we caught him."

Something else had been nagging at Michael's thoughts. "Do you have a description of the missing statue?"

"Only this original message received two days ago." Segar took a paper from his breast pocket, unfolded it, and handed it over.

"Pilgrims traveling south through your area, destination Middle East. Less than one hundred in number. They are believed to possess a four-foot-high image of the Virgin, done all in gold with a diamond crown, formerly on display in a Latvian church. Leader of pilgrimage, known as Father Joseph, turned back with companions due to illness. All in that party found shot to death near Russian border. Weapon, not recovered, was 9 mm. pistol, possibly equipped with silencer. Evidence indicates killer escaped by private plane, prob-

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ably without golden image being carried to Middle East by main group of pilgrims."

Michael handed it back. "This is all the information you have?"

"What else do I need?"

"You told me the Virgin was solid gold."

"What does it say? *Done all in gold.*"

But Michael was still troubled. "A solid-gold statue four feet high would weigh far too much for one man, or even two men, to carry."

"Are you saying it wasn't stolen at all? That the pilgrims lied about that?"

"I don't know," Michael admitted. "Something is wrong." He tried to remember the words Marc Landau and the woman had used in describing the Golden Virgin.

Presently he went down to the road where Landau was gathering the pilgrims together in preparation for the continuation of the journey. He spoke to them in a fatherly way, urging them to put aside the tragedy of their loss—the loss of the Virgin and of their good friend Kaskar—and continue on regardless. He spoke of the triumph that awaited them at the end, even if that triumph proved to be death.

When he had finished, Michael took him aside and asked, "Why did you lie to me about the statue?"

"I said nothing about a statue."

Michael realized the man was correct. He and the other pilgrims had merely called it a golden image. Even Germain had seemed surprised at the mention of a statue. "You never corrected us," Michael retorted.

"We felt it best to recover it ourselves. If too many people knew what they were looking for, someone might have found it and kept it."

Michael was remembering the search earlier that morning. "It's not a statue, it's something flat—a painting, perhaps. Something that could be hidden under a rug. I thought you were looking for trap doors." Then a vision came to him, a vision of the pilgrims arriving in the Holy Land, marching into the heart of Beirut carrying their banner. "It's a banner of some sort! *Done all in gold* means with gold thread!"

Marc Landau nodded. "That is the truth, Gypsy. It is a white banner with the Virgin woven in golden thread, her head crowned by one hundred small diamonds."

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"I see," Michael said slowly. He did see, at last. And what he saw was not pleasant.

He walked for a long time by himself, deep in thought. There was only one course of action open to him, but he delayed taking it. Finally, when he saw that the pilgrims were preparing to depart, he knew he had no choice.

Carnavitch himself came to the door in answer to Michael's knock. "Is Marta here?" Michael asked quietly. "I must see her."

"Is this more about yesterday's trouble?"

"In a way, yes."

"I don't want her disturbed again."

"There are duties that fall on my shoulders as king of the tribe, Carnavitch. I did not seek them, but I must respect them."

Marta came from where she had been listening around the corner. "What do you wish, Michael Vlado?"

He stared at this Gypsy woman, tall and slender in the doorway of her house. She was one of his people, and he hated what he had to do. "Marta, I must speak about yesterday, and about what happened in the nighttime."

"The pilgrim was killed by that man from the plane," she said promptly.

"No, Marta. The man from the plane killed others with his silenced gun, but the pilgrim Kaskar was stabbed. I think you stabbed him, Marta."

"I—"

"You were enraged at your treatment by Landau yesterday. You went out there during the night with a knife, perhaps thinking Landau would be at the van—"

"I went to keep my husband from going," she said. "I knew he wanted to kill the pilgrim."

"And Kaskar was there, guarding their treasure. You stabbed him, and took it."

Her husband had stepped between them. "You may be our tribal king, but you have no right to make these accusations. The pilgrims searched this house along with the others. They found no statue."

"It's not a statue but a white banner with the image of the Virgin done with gold thread."

"The pilgrims knew what they were looking for," Carnavitch argued. "They didn't find it here."

"They didn't look in the right place, or ask the right question."

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"What question?"

"Why Marta was hanging her sheets out to dry so early, just after dawn."

She broke away from them, out of the house, walking fast, then started to run. Michael went after her. "Marta! Stop!"

He would have moved faster had she not headed for the ravine at the edge of the woods. Expecting her to stop when she reached it, he slowed down. It wasn't until the final instant that he realized her intention. By then it was too late. She ran off the edge of the ravine, falling through the treetops to the unseen land below.

After they'd found her body, Michael tried to comfort Carnavitch, but there was little he could say to the man just yet. He trudged to the top of the ravine and saw that Captain Segar was already at the clothesline, turning up the sheets to reveal the white banner hanging neatly beneath them.

"It was a clever hiding place," Segar said.

"Especially so since we didn't know what we were looking for."

Presently Landau and Svetlana came to claim their treasure. "Thank you for everything you have done," Landau said. "I am sorry that our stopping here resulted in two deaths. The ways of the Lord are strange at times."

"Will you go on to the Middle East now?" Michael asked them.

Svetlana nodded. "We go to stop the fighting and the bloodshed. We go in peace. We will march between the Armies with our banner before us."

Segar watched them load up and pull out at last. "They are foolish people," he told Michael. "They will be slaughtered before they're in Lebanon a single day."

"Perhaps," Michael said. "But we have done our small part. We have given them back their banner."

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

As a boy, Wilfrid Pond had often played in the park greenhouse with his sister Cecily. In the depths of the Toronto winter, strange plants flourished beneath the glass dome and carp lurked like carrots in trickling pools. In one of their games, they pretended they were lost in the jungle while Pond, who had been briefly interested in exotic fauna then, would describe the giant lemon-eyed cats that might be crouching in the humid darkness, or the lurid snakes hanging in fat coils ready to drop from the overhead branches, or the beetles as hard, big, and bright as a Sunday shoe hiding in every fern . . .

THE GREENHOUSE DOGS

by JAMES POWELL

Within the park's high iron fence were, among other things, a tree planted by a Prince of Wales, a statue of the poet Robert Burns, and a greenhouse with a central dome tall enough to accommodate palm trees. Since his retirement, Wilfrid Pond had come to the park every morning to read on a bench which he had chosen for his own dark purpose near the statue of the poet. Pond was a small, quiet-looking man with a tall forehead and a head of immaculately white hair worn parted down the middle and carefully arranged on top.

This head of hair was what most people saw of him, for Pond was nearsighted. When he raised his face from his book, it was to use the pistol of his cocked thumb and index finger to push his glasses back up on his nose. Before lowering his head again, he would invariably look around and smile. The park was an old friend. As a boy, Pond had often played in the greenhouse with his sister Cecily.

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In the depths of the Toronto winter, strange plants flourished beneath that glass dome and carp lurked like carrots in trickling pools. In one of their games, they pretended they were lost in the jungle while Pond, who had been briefly interested in exotic fauna then, would describe the giant lemon-eyed cats that might be crouching in the humid darkness, or the lurid snakes hanging in fat coils ready to drop from the overhead branches, or the beetles as hard, big, and bright as a Sunday shoe hiding under every fern. Cecily had loved to play that game. It was several years before she started to wake up screaming. Pond still felt a responsibility for that.

On this particular spring day, something set him wondering if the greenhouse was still the same. It had been forty-five years since he'd been inside. He remembered a plant there called Mother-in-Law's Tongue, with long glossy green-and-black leaves as mottled as a fish and a thorn at the very tip. Pond couldn't say if the name was accurate for he had never married.

The people in the park were all familiar to him. Some he knew by type, like the urgent striders who used the main path as a shortcut between Carlton and Gerrard. Others he knew by name, like old Mrs. Beattie, who once taught piano and now had intense conversations with Frederic Chopin, or Mr. Fisk way over by the Gerrard Street gate, who would return in midafternoon—as Pond sometimes did to escape the monotony of his fearful sister—and wait until the granddaughter he doted on got off the streetcar in her school plaid skirt and beret. And there were those Pond had given nicknames, like the old man he called Knobby because he always sat with his pantleg pulled up to bare an arthritic knee to the thin wash of spring sunshine.

A policeman came down the path where Pond sat, his pace idle and his thoughts elsewhere. He looked crisp and comfortable in his blue shirt and Sam Browne belt. Pond watched him pass. When he'd been a boy, the uniform had been bobby helmets and heavy cloth and high collars at that time of the year and tall black Persian-lamb hats for winter. It had been hard for Pond to accept the change. They'd changed the street signs from black on white to white on black not long thereafter. That took getting used to, too.

Pond returned to his book of the moment, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in the Constance Garnett translation. He had been trying for several days to get through the first fifty pages. But he could never get the patronymics straight or understand the gossip from court. He persisted because it passed the time—and, he suspected, because he

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liked the name Constance Garnett, the garnet being the gemstone of constancy. In the beginning he'd thought how clever of Mr. Garnett to name his daughter Constance. So he'd been a bit taken aback to learn from the jacket blurb that Mr. Garnett had been her husband. After some consideration, Pond decided it was even more amazing that a woman named Constance and a man named Garnett would meet and marry.

As Pond sat reading, he felt someone sit down on the other end of the bench. He smiled to himself without turning or making any sign he had noticed the new arrival. A conversation was about to be initiated, Pond was sure of that. He hoped it wouldn't be a dullard with some remark about the weather. Pond had learned from experience to close his book and flee such people. The best conversationalists generally slapped at their newspaper or muttered at a slouching teenaged passerby or made a general statement about the world going to hell in a handbasket. No matter how qualified your agreement, the speaker would embrace you as a brother philosopher and the conversation would be off to the races. Pond enjoyed these discussions and liked to think he brought a kind of cheerful wisdom to them.

As Pond waited for the man to speak, a breeze with winter still in it scattered the fragile spring air. "They don't make springs the way they used to," said a man's voice.

Impressed by this excellent straddle of weather and handbaskets, Pond turned to peer at the new arrival from over the top of his glasses. Then his eyebrows rose in surprise, for the speaker, a man in early middle age with a round, unmilitary face, was wearing the full dress uniform of an officer in the Royal Canadian Regiment, complete with red tunic and white pith helmet with spike.

"You're quite right, sir, they don't," Pond agreed.

"You don't have to call me 'sir,' " said the man regretfully. "I'm not a major. The uniform's rented. I wore it last night to a dance." He held out a hand to be shaken. "Gordon Harner."

Pond introduced himself, adding, "I didn't know you could do that. Rent Army uniforms, I mean."

Harner nodded. "They probably wouldn't have rented me a Toronto regiment. Like the Royal Canadian Dragoons, eh? But who'd want to?" Here the man crossed his legs and then, as if deciding it made him look unmilitary, uncrossed them. "Have you heard the one about the RCD's regimental colors: 'Blue for the seas they never

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crossed, red for the blood they never shed, and yellow the reason why'?"

Pond gave a short laugh. "That's a new one on me," he admitted.

"Now the Royal Canadian Regiment, there's a uniform any man would be proud to wear. The rental contract said I don't have to bring it back until noon. So I'm keeping it on until then. I'll change at the store." Harner nodded at the overnight bag sitting between his ankles. "It's Moss Park Costumes down on Queen. Do you know the neighborhood? You live around here, Wilfrid?"

"Just around the corner," said Pond, nodding northward. "My sister and I've lived in the same house all our lives."

"You're luckier than you know. Today it's all move here, move there, move someplace else."

Pond nodded for the thin pleasure of agreeing. In fact, he didn't feel lucky. The neighborhood had changed so much that remembering how it was when he'd been a boy was like news from a very distant land indeed. But Harner's remark gave him an opening to nudge the conversation the way he wanted it to go.

"My sister doesn't think so—about our being lucky, I mean. The world's a bit too much for Cecily. She hasn't left the house in thirty years. Says it's too dangerous out here. She finds life overwhelming, I'm afraid." Pond smiled at Harner. "For some people it is, you know. So my coming to the park like this is therapeutic for her, or so I like to think. I tell her about the people I see and what we say. She admits it's almost as good as television."

Harner gave him a long, owlish look. "I can see you love your sister very much, Wilfrid," he said.

Pond nodded modestly. Then he said, "With Cecily it's as if years ago she saw some great disaster coming far down the road and she's been waiting for it to get here ever since. Do you believe there are people who can see into the future like that, Gordon?" he asked.

"I can't say I do."

"Some say our poets are great predictors of the future," said Pond with a backward toss of his head at the statue. "Some say Burns here predicted the use of local anesthetics in surgery."

"I didn't know that," said Harner with solemn interest.

Pond smiled and sprang his little joke. "Didn't Burns write: 'Would that God the gift would give us/To see ourselves as others saw us.'?"

Harner winced and looked away. He stared across at the greenhouse for several moments. Then he shook his head. "I sat down here because you looked like a thoughtful man, an ethical man," he

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said in a disappointed voice. "I told myself, I'll bet here's somebody who'll appreciate this little dilemma of mine. I hope to God I wasn't mistaken, Wilfrid. You see, it's a question of life or death. Unless you can talk me out of it, I'm going to have to kill Charles Cornish"—Harner looked at his wristwatch—"in an hour and forty-five minutes."

As convincingly as these words were delivered, Pond decided to pretend Harner was joking. He managed to keep an amused expression while his eyes searched the park for the policeman. But the paths and benches were almost empty. The cool breeze had brought clouds and turned the dome of the greenhouse from silver to grey.

As if to explain his time reference, Harner said, "Oh, I could kill him now. But I wouldn't want to disgrace the uniform. As I said, I get to wear it until noon."

"But why do you want to kill this person?"

"I don't want to. I must. Because of what happened last night."

"At the fancy-dress ball?"

Harner's face turned livid. "It *wasn't* a fancy-dress ball!" he hissed furiously through clenched teeth and spittle. Then he caught himself. Taking a deep breath, he started to fan himself with the pith helmet, thought better of it, and tucked the helmet under his arm—military fashion.

"After the company dance last year some big muckety-muck did say, 'Hey, let's make the next one fancy dress.' I thought that was a great idea. I'd always wanted an excuse to rent this uniform. I spent the next six months marching around in it in my imagination. If anybody ever told me that Mr. Mulcaster himself finally put the kibosh on the fancy-dress idea, I wasn't listening. That's how much I was looking forward to wearing the uniform. My big fear was that somebody else might try the Royal Canadian Regiment bit. If anybody did, I figured it'd be Cornish. Looking back on it, I can see that was crazy. If he'd gone for a dress uniform it would've been Royal Canadian Dragoons—Cornish is a flashy silver-helmet kind of guy if ever there was one.

"But anyway, a couple of months ago I asked him, you know, just in passing, what costume he was going to wear. He looked at me for a second. Then he said, 'Gordon, you're the third person who's asked me that this week. I didn't tell the others because, frankly, I'm out to win the prize for the best costume. But since you're a man of honor and wouldn't steal my idea, I will tell you. I'm going to go as Pantaloon.'

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"Pantaloon, for God sake!" said Harner scornfully. "That's Cornish for you. He can't take anything seriously, not even a fancy-dress ball. I told him as much when he worked for me on *Our Mutual Friend*, the mutual-fund newsletter I edit for Mulcaster Publications. He's the kind of guy who'd walk the halls of our nation's financial capital whistling 'Mexicali Rose.' He's never cared much for me, either. Claims I held him back. He wanted to start this business magazine for entrepreneurs who don't take themselves too seriously. When I scoffed at the idea, he went over my head to Mr. Mulcaster, who liked the concept. And so *Beeswax Week* was born."

"Oh, dear," said Pond with a little smile.

Harner looked back at him with sad eyes. "Wilfrid," he said, "the damn thing's selling like hotcakes." He shook his head ruefully. "Cornish is Mulcaster's white-haired boy." He cast a critical eye heavenward before continuing.

"But let's get back to our little story. So there I was last night, striding into Casa Loma all togged out like this. And of course no one else was in costume. Cornish had positioned himself near the entrance to enjoy the show. I could see him biting his cheeks to keep from laughing. But while a lot of people were giving me the fisheye, I could see through my embarrassment that others were figuring maybe I'd served in the regiment or something and had the right to wear the uniform instead of evening dress. So I decided to brazen it out. And I think I did."

"Then I'd say no harm done," said Pond.

Harner raised a finger against interruptions before continuing. "The trouble is, at the dance I met Dorinne, this new assistant editor at *Beeswax Week*. I could see she was attracted to me. Oh, sure, the uniform played a large part in that, it's a fashionable regiment, but, well, to make a long story short, Dorinne and I had a wonderful evening. Still, I knew that today Cornish would set her straight about my thinking it was fancy dress and my uniform being rented. Even as we danced cheek-to-cheek, I could hear her terrible laughter."

"Perhaps she wouldn't laugh."

"I know whereof I speak," said Harner with authority. "She'd laugh. Oh, what a fool she'd take me for. Still, knowing all that, I resolved to enjoy the evening. I took her home afterward and stood with her at her door for an hour, talking, hoping to prolong the moment. Stammering like a damn schoolboy, I even asked her out

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again and was overjoyed when she said yes. Isn't that crazy? I mean, I knew it would be all over between us as soon as she saw Cornish.

"That would be this afternoon. You see, today's the day the Mulcaster editors meet over lunch to discuss future market trends. Afterward, they return to their various offices to assign the assistant editors their new projects. Right after lunch—that's when Cornish would let her in on his little joke." Harner put his hands over his ears and shook his head to ward off Dorinne's laughter. "I walked the streets all night, pondering my alternatives. By dawn I knew there was only one way. I have to kill Cornish."

"But it's wrong to kill someone," said Pond.

"Isn't that a simple answer to a complex problem, Wilfrid?" asked Harner. "Can't a man defend himself?"

"But you're not being attacked."

"That man might as well put a bullet in my head," said Harner earnestly. He reached over and tapped Pond's knee. "Okay, call me Mr. Sobersides. I'm not the kind of guy who plays around with the ladies. Dorinne's a once-in-a-lifetime chance for me. If I don't kill him, Cornish can destroy it all"—he snapped his fingers—"just like that."

Pond gave him a compassionate look and shook his head. "But suppose you do kill Cornish and get away with it and marry Dorinne—what kind of a life are we talking about? Suppose the RCR gets called back to the colors for some police action or other?" Pond mimicked the plummy tones of a well known television anchorman. " 'Once again, Canada's brave boys answer the United Nations' call. Seen here is a contingent of the Royal Canadian Regiment boarding the transport planes that will take them to Cyprus, that hotbed of Greek and Turkish rivalry.' How would you explain your not going?"

"It was a long night," said Harner. "I've thought it all out and I'm way ahead of you. I'd build this secret room in the attic and stock it with food and water. I'd always keep enough money in the bank account to tide her over while I was gone. After Dorinne and I had exchanged our tearful goodbyes and I'd kissed little Gordie and Doug in their beds, I'd sneak back in the house and upstairs to the secret room. When the regiment returned, I'd whip down to Moss Park Costumes and out to the airport and mingle with the welcoming crowd."

Switching into a plummier imitation of the television anchorman, he intoned, " 'As our brave boys of the Royal Canadian Regiment return home from their stay in Cyprus, a great world says, "Well

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done, Canada. Well done!" while one jubilant officer raises a triumphant finger skyward. Yes, we are indeed number one!' "

"But you'd lose your job," insisted Pond.

"And find another," said Harner quickly. "And have many a talk with my wife about immoral companies that won't hold a man's job for him when he's off fighting for peace in our time."

Pond shrugged helplessly. Harner seemed to have an answer for everything.

"Cornish must die," said Harner, "unless, as I said, you can give me some reason why he shouldn't. By daybreak this morning I'd figured out the why and the where. I just hadn't decided the how. So when I stopped by my apartment to call in sick, I picked up a few things." He unzipped the overnight bag and pulled out a hunting knife in a sheath, a pair of leather gloves, a length of picture wire, and a pistol equipped with a silencer.

Pond's eyes grew wide at the last item. "How'd you get your hands on something like that in Toronto?"

"Ever heard of Merchants of Death mutual funds?" asked Harner. "Baskets of stock in armament companies, defense contractors, and the like—safe, high-yield funds we recommend to the conservative investor."

"Like widows and orphans?" asked Pond.

Harner shot him a sharp glance. "This is a serious business, Wilfrid. This isn't something out of *Beeswax Week*. Human life is on the line." He forced his voice to be calm. "Anyway, one of these mutuals, the Urban Gunplay Fund, which focuses on the stocks of companies manufacturing weapons for everyday self-defense, gave them out as party favors at a recent get-together for the financial press, including yours truly."

"Silencers and all?"

"They call them anti-noise pollution devices," said Harner. "But I guess that's neither here nor there since I decided shooting Cornish would be much too fast. Ditto the knife." As he spoke, the man began pulling on the leather gloves. "Did I tell you we Mulcaster editors have our weekly lunch at Chez Simon?" Pond knew the place, a pretentious operation which had started out years before as a King Street lunch counter under the name Simon the Shepherd's Pie Man. "Cornish likes to linger over his food," said Harner. "He's always the last to leave. And he's a tooth-proud man. Maybe that's because he grins so much. Anyway, he carries a pocket toothbrush and uses it after every meal. There's a janitor's closet in the corridor leading

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to the men's room. That's where I'll wait." Harner took up the picture wire in his gloved hands and snapped it until he made it hum. He glared at Pond defiantly. "Unless you give me a reason why I shouldn't."

"You can't!" shouted Pond. "If you do, I'll go to the police!" He lowered his voice and added firmly, "It's as simple as that, Gordon!"

Harner made an exasperated noise, looked away, and put his pith helmet back on. Then he turned back to Pond and said angrily, "Good God, man, is that the best you can do? How are you going to go to the police? Didn't you understand that I'd have to kill you, too, if you couldn't give me a reason not to kill Cornish?"

Pond hadn't seen Harner pick up the pistol, but suddenly it was there, pointed at his chest.

"You know," said Harner, "making up your mind to kill your first man takes a hell of a lot of thought. I must have walked for blocks last night stewing over that one. But deciding to kill number two's a real snap." He lowered the pistol barrel. "I'll tell you what," he said magnanimously. "I'll give you another chance. Think now. Why can't I kill Cornish?"

Pond's mind raced. He stared past Harner to the main path. There were more people walking there now. But every head was turned away from him in the direction of the greenhouse. He blurted out, "Because you haven't an alibi. The police will check with the Mulcaster people to see if Cornish had any enemies at work. When they hear that you called in sick, you'll be their prime suspect. And you won't have any alibi."

"But I will," said Harner. "After I kill you, I'll take your house key and pay your sister Cecily a visit. I suspect I can make myself very unpleasant if I have to. When I'm done, she'll be glad to say we were together. Your sister will provide me with the alibi I need for Cornish's murder and for yours, too."

Pond was trembling. He knew Harner could feel the bench shake. In his mind's eye he could see the man turning the key in the lock and entering the house that Cecily always insisted they keep so dark. Half fearfully, his sister would call out "Wilfrid?" as she always did. But this time his voice would not come to reassure her and there would be a different footstep in the hall. "But that would kill her," insisted Pond hoarsely. "She'd die of fright."

"I doubt that," said Harner. "I do indeed. She's a strong woman, and a smart one, too. She had the sense to know it's dog-eat-dog, tooth-and-nail out here. She had the sense to hide and the strength

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to stay hidden all these years until you led me to her. You're the foolhardy one, Wilfrid, walking around as if no harm could ever come your way." Harner smiled contemptuously. "You're one of Cornish's breed, that's what you are. You don't take life seriously."

"All right," said Pond sharply. Then he repeated "All right" in a humbler voice and stared down at the path. "Leave my sister out of it. I won't go to the police. I'll be your alibi. I'll swear you were here with me."

Harner's smile turned sad and grew in size. "A while back you were telling me it was wrong to kill another person. Now you'll stand idly by while I take Cornish's life, and on top of that you'll supply me with an alibi. How is it I don't believe you?" He shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I can't depend on you, Wilfrid. Sight unseen, I'd say your sister's my best shot. She sounds smart enough to see the consequences of betraying me and strong enough to stick to our story no matter what. I'm afraid she's got you beaten hands down in those departments, Wilfrid." Harner raised the pistol again. Their eyes met. Pond felt the weapon against his chest. He stiffened and waited.

Then Harner said quietly, "Of course there is a way out of our little dilemma—one that would solve things rather neatly." Harner nodded to direct Pond's eyes to the weapon. Pond found it was the pistol butt against his chest, not the pistol barrel.

Harner nodded. "Here's our way out," he said. "You kill Cornish for me. That way you won't be able to go to the police. And I could provide my own alibi. I wouldn't have to kill you. And we could leave your sister out of the whole business."

Pond's eyes looked close to filling up with tears. "But I don't even know your damned Cornish."

"*Our* damned Cornish," corrected Harner. "Look, it'd be easy as pie. You wouldn't have to linger over it the way I would with the picture wire. You hide in the janitor's closet until somebody comes along whistling 'Mexicali Rose.' You step out. You shoot him several times in the heart and pop out the door to the parking lot."

Harner dropped the pistol into Pond's lap. "But believe me, Wilfrid, it's dog-eat-dog. If it turns out I have to kill Cornish myself, I'll come after you and your sister. I'll get her first just to give you something to think about, then I'll kill you, too." While Harner's hands mimed the slow strangulation of someone with picture wire, his head did a twitching imitation of the victim, complete with dry noises and lolling tongue.

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In the midst of this, Pond scooped up the pistol and, with trembling hands, pointed it at Harner. "You bastard!" he said.

"Be careful," said Harner. "It's not on the safety-catch."

"*You* be careful," ordered Pond in a reedy voice. "Just—just put your hands on your head."

"You're not very trustworthy, Wilfrid," observed Harner. "But, no, I'm not going to play along—at least not until you get an ammunition clip for the gun."

Pond lowered the weapon without bothering to look to see if there was a clip in it. He sagged on the bench.

"Buck up, Wilfrid," said Harner. "The clip's taped to the side of the sink next to the wall in the janitor's closet at Chez Simon." Thrusting the knife and picture wire and gloves back inside the overnight bag, he got to his feet. "So I'm counting on you, okay? Don't make me come looking for you and Cecily. You won't like it if I do." Without another word he picked up the bag and marched off down the path.

Pond followed him with his eyes as he walked out of the park and continued along Gerrard in the direction of Sherbourne, the black-iron fence making his figure stutter like those animated corners in Big-Little books he remembered as a boy. Then Harner turned the corner onto Sherbourne and was gone.

Pond hung his head for a moment, concentrating all his powers on bringing his racing heart and churning stomach under control. He knew he mustn't panic. He needed to think things out calmly. What could he do? What *could* he do? Go to the police. All right. But they wouldn't believe his story, not until Harner himself killed Cornish. Then it would be too late. By then Pond and his sister would be dead, too, killed by a sadistic madman who believed Pond had let him down and helped destroy his life. He and his sister couldn't even run away. Cecily wouldn't leave the house. In his mind's eye, he saw her face. Suddenly, as though she knew someone was thinking about her, her expression turned to fear and her lips moved. "Wilfrid?" he knew she was saying.

He gave a trembling sigh. But when he raised his head again, he had determined what he was going to do.

The park was bright now, the main path busy. A streetcar clanged on Carlton. The same policeman who had passed earlier was strolling toward him. He stopped when he reached the bench and for an instant Pond thought he had seen him slip the pistol under his

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jacket. Then the policeman reached down and picked up the copy of *War and Peace* which had fallen to the ground beside the bench. He read the book's spine as he handed it back and gave Pond a suspicious look.

When he had moved on, Pond got to his feet and started off in the direction of the restaurant, blocks away. Yes, it *was* dog-eat-dog. It *was* tooth-and-claw. Perhaps as he crouched in the darkness of the janitor's closet with the clip in the pistol, his ears straining for "Mexicali Rose," he would come up with a way out. Perhaps. But for the moment, his greatest fear was that when it came right down to it he wouldn't have the courage to kill Cornish, just as he hadn't been able to pull the trigger on Harner.

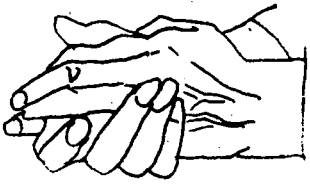
Suddenly a voice said, "Well, good morning, Mr. Pond. Are you all right? You look like you just lost your best friend."

Pond turned to discover a smiling Mr. Fisk sitting on a bench near the Gerrard Street gate. "Oh, hello, Mr. Fisk," he said, adding automatically, "how's your lovely granddaughter?"

"Still head of her class," answered the proud grandfather. "Nice of you to ask."

Pond had started to walk on. But now he stopped. Suddenly the whole thing was clear to him. Telling himself it was the law of the jungle, that it was dog-eat-dog, he went back and sat down on the bench.

"Lucky my running into you, Mr. Fisk," he said, looking at his wristwatch. "I really need your advice on a matter of life or death. You see, unless you can talk me out of it, in forty-five minutes I'm going to have to kill a man named Charles Cornish."



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Flyrod sounded pretty frantic out there—barking up a storm. It sounded like she had something trapped in the outhouse. Maybe a raccoon again, like last year. Joey took his parka and Navy watch cap from the hook alongside the door, got the 5-cell flashlight, and went out into the cool moonlit night. Flyrod ran up whining and wagging her tail like crazy before Joey even stepped off the old porch he built from scrap lumber some years ago. Maybe he'd paint it someday, maybe he wouldn't.

J. V. Freitas has written technical articles and poetry, but this is his first fiction, written when a local writers association in upstate New York offered a free seminar. Recently, at 52, he went to college and earned a degree in business management and economics, and began his own business as an environmental inspector. May it leave him sufficient time to pursue a parallel career in the writing business . . .

DUFFLE BAG

by J. V. FREITAS

"Hey, Flyrod, what's all the noise? You've heard airplanes before."

She just cocks one ear back, turns to look at me, then swivels back to the window and starts her barking again. It ain't too likely that anybody's out there this time of night, not this time of year, so far from the nearest good road. Sounded like a small plane, maybe heading for the airport in Pittsfield.

Flyrod is my ten-year-old husky bitch—had her since she was a pup. She has a few grey hairs around her muzzle now and doesn't move as fast as she used to. A few years ago, she gave up her willing-to-please grin for a mostly mournful expression.

I get back to cleaning and oiling my favorite casting reel, an old

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Daiwa that's wound in many a lunker from the bottom of Deer Run Lake. It's a big lake, about four miles long and a mile wide, in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, between Pittsfield and the Vermont border. I own a thirty-foot trailer on the west shore. Pa left me the five acres it sets on. Never put in a phone, electric, or any of that stuff—never needed them, never wanted them. Me and Flyrod get along just fine. We've got beds on one end, kitchen on the other, and living room in between. There's faded birch paneling all around and old furniture that came with the trailer, except for the kitchen table and chairs. They were Ma's. I brought them out here after she passed on. Real small bathroom, but it doesn't matter. Don't have running water, anyway. I keep bait minnows swimming in the bathtub sometimes. Visitors get a kick out of that. Not that there's been so many visitors over the years—just the occasional guy from the job, out for a little fishing.

It ain't that I don't like people. I get along okay, I guess. Just never seem to know what to say. I never cared much about the same things most people I know care about. Don't go to church, don't believe there's anybody up there watching me. Don't care much about television or movies—I have a TV in my apartment in Pittsfield, but hardly ever turn it on. Make enough to live on working on the line at Calwin Electric. I keep my bills paid up, feed myself and Flyrod, and have enough left to keep up my old outboard boat and buy fishing gear once in a while.

That's what I care about most. Jump in my surplus jeep, cut off Route 7 onto the old logging road and out to my flaking green trailer alongside the lake. I fish all weekend all year round and every other chance I get. Right now it's too early for hunting season, too early for ice-fishing, and too cold for everybody else. I have the lake pretty well to myself. I like it that way. If I was rich, I'd buy a lake all to myself. I'll never be rich, though.

I could be making better money if I wanted to. Manny, the day supervisor in the motor-winding department, used to keep after me. He'd say, "Joey, you'd make a good foreman. Take a few classes at the community college and I'll put your name in for the job. Fifty a week more, and who knows where you'll go from there?"

The fifty bucks would be nice, but who needs the hassle? Pa was a foreman at Calwin. He made decent money and he enjoyed being called Mr. Tantzen by the other workers. Only problem was he had to work all kind of hours and hardly had time for his fishing. Plus

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he used to come home pissed off a lot about this or that problem. That ain't for me. Manny finally gave up talking about it.

I never got married. I almost got up the nerve to ask a gal at work—her name was Sherry. She worked second shift, so we used to see each other on weekends. I didn't ask, though—figured she would have said no, anyway. Now I'm fifty and who'd have me? Flyrod loves me, I know—she's my girl. She don't understand what I'm saying most times, but she don't criticize or look at me like I'm dumb when the words don't come out right.

She keeps on barking, snuffling, and whining a little, and looking toward the door with her mournful look.

"Go on," I tell her, "get out and chase that bunny and don't get yourself in any trouble. I ain't gonna spend a week pulling porcupine quills out of your hide this time." She doesn't go out as eagerly as I thought she would, but she goes. And I go back, under the flickering light of the Coleman lantern, to getting my gear ready for an early start.

She sounds pretty frantic out there—barking up a storm. It sounds like she's got something trapped in the outhouse. Maybe a raccoon again—like last year, when I forgot to close the door behind me after I got done. I take my parka and Navy watch cap from the hook alongside the aluminum door, get the 5-cell flashlight, and go out into the cool moonlit night, heading for the path to the outhouse. Flyrod runs up whining and wagging her tail like crazy before I even step off the old porch I built from scrap lumber some years ago. Maybe I'll paint it someday. Maybe I won't.

I follow Flyrod, lighting the way with the beam of my big flashlight, swinging it in an arc to both sides of the narrow path through the pines. She trots right on past the outhouse, turning to be sure I'm still following. "Hey, don't worry, Fly," I tell her. "I'm right behind you. I ain't quite that old."

At first I can't figure out what I'm seeing. A long thin bright-orange cloth bag ending in a big black mound, covered with white strings like somebody dumped a pot of cooked spaghetti over it. The orange bag, about ten feet long, is hanging half over some bushes. As I get closer, I can see the mound fairly clearly. It's a body, lying face down, one leg crumpled under it, arms spread wide. The body is wearing blood-soaked black coveralls, a parachute harness, and a white motorcycle helmet. It's not spaghetti I'm seeing, it's the white shroud-lines of a parachute. And attached to the left ankle by

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a three-foot nylon clothesline is a khaki duffle bag. On the duffle bag, stenciled in flaking white letters, is ERICKSON, K.L. USA.

"Flyrod old girl," I say, "I think I know what's in Mr. Erickson's duffle bag. And I don't think it's his lunch."

It isn't the first body I've ever seen, not even the messiest. There were lots worse in Korea. Some of them I knew pretty well. Flyrod sits on her haunches, panting and watching curiously as I turn the head sideways, pulling on the edge of the blood-smeared helmet. Not much left of the face, but it's a man, a man with a beard. I can't tell his color, he's covered with blood and pine-needles. I wipe my hand on the pine-needles covering the ground, stand up, and take a look around.

The orange bag is the sleeve for a sport parachute. Looks like the pilot chute never pulled it off the main chute and the jumper did a streamer into the ground. I go to take a closer look at the duffle bag. Whatever's in it, it's stuffed full and closed tight by a nylon rope threaded through the steel grommets at the top. I figure it could only be money or drugs. Maybe someone trying the trick that guy did a few years ago, jumping out of a jet after skyjacking it for ransom.

I better not touch anything else, I decide. The cops aren't supposed to like someone messing up a crime scene. "Okay, Flyrod," I say, "let's get back to the camp and think this over."

I get a beer out of the box I keep in the lake, light a cigarette, and sit to figure out what to do next while I drink half the beer and Flyrod laps up the other half out of her tin bowl.

They say curiosity killed the cat, but I'm still curious. What exactly is in the bag? I take my flashlight again, along with my fishing knife, and go back out the door, Flyrod at my heels.

Back to the bag, I cut the nylon rope that's holding it closed. It's full of plastic sacks filled with white powder that glitters under the beam of my flashlight, and there's a package pushed partway down the side about the size of a cigar box. It has a Spanish-language newspaper wrapped around it.

"What the hell, Flyrod," I comment, "in for a dime, in for a dollar." So I cut open the newspaper and there's money. Lots of money. Packs of hundred-dollar bills wrapped in newspaper.

On the top of the paper it says BOGOTA NUEVA. I know that's Colombia, where the cocaine comes from.

I stuff everything down into the bag, tie it closed, and head back

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to the trailer. I don't want problems with Colombians. They can't take a joke. Neither can the cops. Nobody involved with this kind of stuff can take a joke. Time to fire up the jeep and go report this to the cops. There's a Massachusetts State Police barracks about ten miles up Route 7. Or I can call the Berkshire County Sheriff's Department from the all-night convenience store at the crossroads eight miles south.

"Either way, our fishing's shot for this weekend," I tell Flyrod. Probably more than one weekend. There'll be cops all over the place. Maybe reporters.

"Hey, how would you like to see yourself on TV?" I ask her. "No? Don't blame you."

Maybe someone was waiting for this guy to land. Somebody had to be looking for him. Guys in the plane or on the ground weren't just going to forget about this bag. It must be worth millions. Money *and* cocaine.

While my mind is busy thinking this through, I continue working on my fishing gear—oiling reels, sharpening hooks, and lighting one cigarette after another. My faded formica table is almost completely covered with lures, reels, grease and oil cans, empty dog-food and beer cans, and an overflowing ashtray. I get up and throw all the junk into a garbage bag, open a can of dogfood, and scrape it into Flyrod's bowl. "Here, maybe this will help you think. We're in this together, you know."

It's already 1:30 A.M. Not a sound outside except for the rustling of the pines and an occasional birdcall. Once I hear a splash as a big one jumps in the lake a few feet from my back window. Only the steady hissing of the Coleman and Flyrod's snores disturb the quiet of the early-November night. Shouldn't have given her a snack. She always takes a nap after eating.

What happens if I keep the stuff? Finders keepers, right?

I wonder how much money is in the bag. What would I do with all the cocaine? Could I sell it to anybody? I don't know anybody who uses coke. Don't want to get to know them, either. The bag must weigh over a hundred pounds. Has to be worth millions. But not to me. I always hated drug pushers. Anyway, they kill each other over drugs. Look at Miami—dead bodies on the street every day. Even babies. Somebody will be looking for this stuff, and if we try selling it they'll find us. "Right, Flyrod? You listening there?" She cocks an ear and continues snoozing. I'd get caught by someone.

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Dead men don't do any fishing. No fishing from a prison cell, either. "Nobody around to feed you or buy you beer any more, Flyrod," I cautioned.

Maybe the drugs were going to Albany. There's a lot more around there now than there used to be. I see that someone gets arrested on the Mass Pike or the Thruway pretty often in a car loaded with drugs. But traffic cops don't pull over airplanes and search them.

And, using a chute, they don't have to worry about getting caught unloading the stuff at an airport. I wonder where the plane came from. Florida, maybe?

I better start moving and get the cops.

There'll be all kinds of cops here. Reporters, too. I suppose the gawkers will follow.

I wonder if the people who own the stuff will want to get even because I turned it in. I sure as hell can't call anybody and say, "Hey, I got your buddy and his duffle bag here. He ain't in too good a shape but the bag is okay." I'll bet there's somebody around looking, and not far away. They must know about where he jumped. The wind would have carried him a ways if his chute had opened, but not too far. There's the public beach half a mile to the south, deserted this time of year. The wind's blowing that way, too. I'll bet someone was waiting for him there.

I open the door and listen close, but there's nothing to hear—only the night sounds of the pine forest on three sides and an occasional splash from the lake.

It's getting later and later. Turn in the stuff and we got trouble. Keep it and we might have even more trouble. Big trouble. No matter what I do, the fishing is going to be screwed up for a while. Maybe for a long while.

I grab my coat and hat and the lantern. "C'mon Flyrod, we got work to do."

She cocks an eye at me, gets up and shakes herself awake, and pads to the door behind me, looking more mournful than ever. I grab the shovel from alongside the outhouse, walk about ten feet, and start digging.

It's just about dawn as I get the hole deep enough. About eight feet ought to do it. I cut the chute loose and drag the body over to the hole. Drop Erickson, K.L. down into it. Go back and get the chute and drop that in on top of him. I stand there for a minute, looking down into the hole, Flyrod tight against my leg and looking

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down, too. Then I go get the duffle bag and drop it in the hole. I shovel another two feet or so of dirt on top of it all.

The jeep takes a few minutes to start and run okay. I hook it to the outhouse with the two chains and pull it over the hole. Then I fill in the old hole for the outhouse and take a good look around to make sure everything looks natural.

I put the shovel away and we go back inside to get my tackle. "C'mon Flyrod—" I scratch her back "—let's go fishing."

She gives me her old willing-to-please grin as we head toward the door.

DETECTIVERSE

HESITANT INVITATION

by MARIANNE McFARLAND McNEIL

Ms. J. B. Fletcher is a star
With well respected name
She earns by solving TV crimes—
But writing is her game.
Her intuition, reasoning,
Compassion warm each show—
I'd love to meet her, shake her hand,
To welcome her, although
While solving showtime mysteries,
Unraveling truth and lies,
No matter where she's visiting
Somebody always dies.

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a NEW Jemima Shore story by

ANTONIA FRASER

Jemima's attention began to wander during Professor Redding's little lecture on the tragedy of Sir Patrick Spens—to the ever-present anxiety of her speech—so that she missed the immediate preamble to the incident which followed, while witnessing the drama itself.

What Jemima saw was the auburn-haired Mrs. Mayall pick up her glass of red wine and throw the contents across the table at the Professor.

"That's for your bloody red wine!" she shouted, scrambling to her feet and half running, half stumbling from the high table and out of the dining hall . . .

THE BLUDE-RED WINE

by ANTONIA FRASER

The Professor suddenly held up his glass and said something which sounded like "blood-red." For a moment, in spite of the odd wording, Jemima Shore thought he was going to propose a toast although most people were still busily eating their second course. The glass was almost full. Red wine glinted in the light of the branched candlestick in the center of the long table. A dark ruby-red: or blood-red, if the Professor preferred to put it that way.

"The blood-red wine. Exactly what kind of wine?" he was asking. It was not a toast.

Jemima felt a quick pang of relief. According to the printed program in front of her, she was due to make her own speech—proposing the toast of the college—immediately after the Queen's health had been drunk. No toast meant no speech, or at least not yet. After-dinner speaking was not Jemima's idea of fun. She didn't like public

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speaking very much in the first place, preferring the television screen—the medium for which, as an investigative reporter and presenter, she had after all been trained. After-dinner speaking in particular gave you the whole length of the meal to dread the moment of rising to your feet, notes in hand—

That reminded her. Nervously, Jemima checked the continued existence of those same notes in her evening bag (pretty but really much too small for this kind of thing). She had been planning her speech for weeks. It wouldn't do to lose hold of it now.

"Chambertin 1976, according to what it says here." Claire Donahue had picked up the program and was peering closely at it. She was an old friend of Jemima's from Cambridge days—hence Jemima's presence at this dinner. Claire had been a lecturer at Mallow for several years and was hoping for tenure. She had invited Jemima to speak on the dubious grounds that this would somehow advance her cause. Jemima, now regretting the weak impulse which had led her to agree—why did she always feel so sorry for Claire, for heaven's sake?—took refuge in irritation at the way Claire simply would not wear her spectacles in public. Ludicrous vanity: it could be nothing else. Surely academics were more or less *expected* to wear spectacles.

Look at Claire with that program barely a centimeter from her pretty, pudgy little nose! Remembering the old days, Jemima decided that Claire must fancy someone or other at the dinner table. Paddy Mayall? He was a handsome hunk, all right. Not quite what you expected to find at an academic dinner. The woman next but one, pale with long auburn Pre-Raphaelite hair, appeared from the seating plan to be Mrs. Mayall. Was it Jemima's imagination or was she gazing at Claire with active dislike? If Jemima's hunch was correct, no wonder. Sweet little Claire could be surprisingly predatory on occasion.

Marie Mayall—what did she know about her? She had received a preliminary gossipy briefing. Ah, yes—money, that was it. Her Laura Ashley dress hardly indicated an enormous income. On the other hand, a plain or plainish woman with an exceptionally handsome husband did sometimes indicate the presence of money in the contract.

Professor Alec Redding, seated on Jemima's left, interrupted these uncharitable thoughts.

"You do realize, my dear Claire, that I am this year's president of the Wine Committee? So that I am well aware not only that this

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is a Chambertin but also of its precise year since I chose it myself. I hardly need reminding—"

Pompous beast, thought Jemima, transferring her irritation to the Professor. She remembered Claire telling her that he had a reputation as a womanizer, students included, since his wife's death a few years back. That and an ostentatious taste for the good things of life—wine, even rather improbably fast cars. No, wait a minute—*vintage* cars. Long-delayed adolescence! Well, he would have to do better than that to fascinate her.

The Professor boomed on: "But then how could you be expected to remember a little detail like the name of the president of the Wine Committee? Matters of greater import on your mind, no doubt."

Greater import—what did that mean? It sounded like a swipe at Claire's private life. Perhaps she had at some point turned down the bouncy Professor. Or was it just heavy-handed academic teasing? Jemima was aware that Alec Redding was still holding up his ruby-red—or blood-red—glass. Time to catch up with Claire's amours when the dreaded speech was over. Jemima was to be the guest of the college for the night. Now what was he saying?

"What *kind* of wine did the King serve? That is my precise question, which I have at last happily been able to express." The Professor paused and then intoned in a suitably sonorous voice:

"The King sat in Dunfermline town
Drinking the blude-red wine—"

The Professor was a smallish man—if his reputation was correct, perhaps he had a short man's compensatory desire to act the lady-killer—but his head at least was impressively leonine. Now he gazed about him as though in triumph at having at last secured an audience. He proceeded to recite the next lines of the ballad, his Scottish accent becoming progressively broader.

"O where will I get a gude sailor
That'll sail the ships o' mine—"

"The tragedy of Sir Patrick Spens," commented Jemima politely. She was aware of some kind of awkwardness in the atmosphere without knowing exactly where it was focused—knowing and loving the ballad from childhood, she was happy to intervene.

"To Noroway, to Noroway,
To Noroway o'er the foam,"

recited Jemima, but without attempting a Scots accent,

"The King's daughter of Noroway,
Tis thou must bring her home."

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"Exactly!"

Professor Redding beamed at her. For a moment, Jemima glimpsed his charm. There was indeed something quite boyish about him now that he had dropped his pomposity on the subject of the Wine Committee. "Sir Patrick Spens it is. And what a tragic tale, eh? A lesson for us all. One moment there he was drinking the blude-red wine in Dunfermline town with the King and all, the next moment he had foolishly set off to bring back his master's bride. Only to bump into a spot of bad weather on the way home. Weather rather like tonight, I fancy!"

It had been an unusually storm-tossed October. Persistent rain had made it virtually impossible for Jemima to glimpse anything of the university town as she drove through. The setting of Mallow was said to resemble that of Stratford, with its medieval bridge under which flowed another, rather less famous river Avon. If the weather cleared up, Jemima might inspect the charms of Mallow properly in the morning. In the meantime, the Professor was intoning once more:

"They hadna been a league, a league,
A league but barely three,
When loud and boisterous grew the wind
And *gurly* grew the sea."

The Professor gave due Scottish relish to the whole passage, but the word "gurly" in particular caused him to roll his tongue round it with zest. "And so they all drowned," he finished with a flourish. "That's for setting off after a glass or two of red wine."

"What is your point exactly, Alec?" The middle-aged, rather plump lady in the black-crepe evening dress had a formidable air. Her spectacles, at least, were firmly on her nose. Jemima consulted her seating plan. Ah, yes—formidable indeed. This was the celebrated Dr. Elena Kirkus: the mere sight of her name at the head of a review was enough to send aspiring young scholars' hearts into their boots. "Apart from letting us all admire your Scottish accent. An unsuspected talent, I must admit."

"Elena! Now you think I'm trespassing on your literary territory, I can see. Would I do that? *Far* too frightened. Look what happened to poor Paddy here. But enough of that. What is my point, you ask. *No* point. No point at all." The Professor lowered his glass at long last. "I was merely seeking instruction. What kind of wine would they have been drinking in Fourteenth Century Scotland? As a wine buff, I am always full of curiosity on these arcane matters."

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"French wine, of course. Imported French wine," said Paddy Mayall after a pause. "If not exactly Chambertin. I congratulate you on this, by the way, Alec. And the Pouilly-Fuissé earlier, for that matter."

Paddy Mayall cleared his throat. Jemima had the impression he was speaking slightly reluctantly.

"And so a Fourteenth Century Scottish King drank French wine!" Professor Redding sounded even more jovial now that he had at last got the answer to his question.

He sipped at the wine in question.

Paddy Mayall looked in the direction of Dr. Kirkus. His expression was almost apprehensive. Since she said nothing, he cleared his throat again and continued: "Thirteenth Century, by the way, not Fourteenth. The ballad may be based on the voyage of a Scottish princess who went to marry the King of Norway in 1281—King Eric. Margaret of Scotland—a good many of her train did drown on that occasion."

Now Paddy began to warm to his theme. "People do sometimes think in error that it was her daughter, the so-called Maid of Norway. She *did* die on her way back to Scotland—in 1290, I think you'll find—but there was no drowning involved. So that on the whole, the evidence does suggest—"

To her shame, Jemima's attention began to wander during this little lecture back to the ever-present anxiety of her speech. So that she missed the immediate preamble to the incident which followed, while witnessing the drama itself. What Jemima saw was the auburn-haired Mrs. Mayall picking up her own glass, full or full enough, of red wine, and throwing the contents across the table at the Professor. His white shirtfront—like most of the men present, he was wearing a dinner jacket—suddenly revealed an enormous dark-red stain. It looked as if he had been shot in some melodramatic amateur theatrical.

Nor did Marie Mayall's accompanying words exactly undo this impression. "That's for your bloody red wine!" she shouted in an unmistakably genuine Scots accent. Then she scrambled to her feet and half ran, half stumbled from the high table and out of the dining hall.

Professor Redding, mopping his shirt with his handkerchief—which merely ruined the latter without cleaning the former—was left exclaiming in what sounded like genuine amazement: "What did I say? What did I do?"

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Paddy Mayall, his handsome face flushed with embarrassment, got up, sat down again, and began: "Alec, I'm frightfully sorry—"

Of those other diners near enough to have taken in what occurred, Claire Donahue kept repeating "Oh, God" in an apparently helpless manner, followed by: "Should I? Should I go after her, do you think?" But she sat still, Jemima noticed, and she noticed also that Paddy Mayall had fixed Claire with an uncommonly determined stare. No, Claire was not to follow.

It was left to Dr. Kirkus to say with dignity, but in a voice of unmistakable reproach: "Alec, how could you? How could you be so tactless? Even cruel. And I thought you were fond of poor Marie."

Marie Mayall did not come back. A series of the diners at the high table left the hall during the rest of the meal with, Jemima suspected, the intention of persuading her to return. That might have been arguably less embarrassing than the sight of her empty place, especially since the college servants continued to plonk down portions of food there, before removing them untouched.

Unlike the excellent wine, the food was rather tasteless. There was also a remarkable number of courses—or was it just the thought of the speech ahead which made Jemima feel the meal was endless? On the other hand, who could tell how Marie Mayall would have behaved if she *had* chosen to return? Her face during her outburst had exhibited a degree of passion quite surprising in a woman at first sight shy and even withdrawn beneath her curtain of long loose hair.

Paddy Mayall was the first to leave the hall when his wife showed no sign of coming back. He came back a short while later without public comment. But he arched his eyebrows in the direction of Claire, who, as Jemima's sponsor, was seated on her left. (Mallow did not necessarily alternate the sexes in its high-table seating plan, considering that to be an old-fashioned formality.) Jemima thought that this time Paddy Mayall was silently commanding Claire to go after his wife, as previously he had adjured her silently to stay.

Sure enough, Claire murmured in Jemima's ear: "Marie's awfully highly strung, as no doubt you've noticed. She's probably lurking in the Ladies' in floods of tears." And she, too, left the hall.

Ten minutes later, she returned alone. Professor Redding was the next one to go, and stayed away longest. His shirt, sopping wet and still pinkish in part, showed signs of a prolonged but clumsy repair job when he came back.

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There was a little extra buzz of conversation from the students in the body of the hall at his return. "Serve him right, the little stoat," said a student sitting at the table directly below, loud enough for Jemima to hear. The wine-throwing incident had certainly not passed unremarked, even if its cause was not understood. For one thing, Jemima Shore's presence at the dinner—a face so familiar from television—concentrated attention upon the high table. Opinions varied, and were hotly argued on both sides, as to whether she looked older/younger/sexier/not so sexy as she did on the box. (Jemima might have been wryly amused to learn that not one single person speculated as to what she might be about to say in her speech.)

Of Jemima's immediate neighbors, Dr. Kirkus was the last to depart and the last to come back. She took the opportunity of the brief break before the speeches to stump from the hall, a heavy but dignified figure. Dr. Kirkus was the one to sort out the errant Mrs. Mayall, if anyone could: of all those present, she exuded moral authority. But her mission, too, was unsuccessful. She simply handed Paddy Mayall a piece of paper.

"Marie's gone home," said Dr. Kirkus. "She left this for you."

Jemima watched Paddy Mayall unfold the note and then crumple it. This time he reddened with what looked like anger. Jemima felt Claire's attention wandering away from her. They were supposed to be discussing the question of depth in television documentaries, but it was a slightly artificial conversation because Jemima was by now beginning to rehearse her speech in her mind. Since she would touch on the same subject, she was reluctant to preempt her arguments in advance.

Paddy Mayall's mouth framed the words: "Marie's taken the car."

"My God!" exclaimed Claire aloud, interrupting Jemima's polite response about viewers' attention span. "I just hope she's going to be okay driving."

"Had she drunk so much?" Jemima added drily: "I rather thought the famous glass was full."

"Normally Marie doesn't drink, so she drives home. I don't know about tonight. She was in such an odd state. But it's a terrible road at the best of times, and in this weather! Dark and very twisty. And miles away from Mallow. They really shouldn't live so far out, but Marie insisted." In her nervous state, Claire was beginning to babble.

There would be a time for all this, Jemima decided, when the

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famous speech was safely accomplished. One way or another, it could not be long now.

How would she start? "*Professors,* ladies, and gentlemen—" Sudden panic. How many professors were there actually present beyond Professor Redding? She must find out at once. Jemima began to search the seating plan earnestly for academic titles and for the time being she forgot about Marie Mayall.

It was in this manner that she didn't learn what it was that had upset Paddy Mayall's wife so much until some time after the dinner was over. Elena Kirkus told her about it all as they gathered in the Senior Common Room after dinner for coffee and further drinks. Jemima by now felt the unnatural bonhomie of one who has been reprieved from execution—or, rather, has been executed and found it did not hurt. Although her speech had been neither the best nor the worst she had ever made—after all that—it was, thank heaven, over. (And she must remember to accept no such nerve-racking invitations from old friends in future, she told herself sternly.)

"You see, poor Marie actually *comes* from Dunfermline," Dr. Kirkus was explaining. "Or more to the point, her father did. He was the man who built up all those stores from scratch—what are they called?—Dunfermline Macgregor, something like that." She mentioned the name of a famous Scottish chain. Money! Yes indeed, thought Jemima, there must certainly be plenty of that about in Marie's family.

"You could certainly call him a king in modern terms. In any case, all that was really very close to home—the wine, the drowning, and the rest of it. For a clever man, Alec can be remarkably imperceptive." Dr. Kirkus frowned, and Jemima had a sudden vision of what it must be like to present an ill-prepared essay to Dr. Kirkus.

"The drowning—" Jemima prompted her. With her speech over, she found her curiosity about her fellow diners resurging.

"It made banner headlines at the time. A guest who drank too much and drowned on his way home. The party was at Marie's father's place on or near a river in Scotland. A bridge featured, I know that. Too much was drunk all round—whisky as well as wine, no doubt, but everyone remembered the wine because the young man who drowned had a bottle of wine with him in his car. He had taken it from the house. There was some sort of crash before the drowning, so that there was wine, red wine, everywhere when the police found him. And blood. Mixed." She paused. "I'm afraid that

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particular detail sunk into the public consciousness. 'The blude-red wine,' as Alec so unfortunately phrased it."

"No wonder she was upset."

"Marie's father was much criticized at the time, and afterward, for letting the young man go, let alone take a bottle of wine. I think the whole matter preyed on his mind. He died not long afterward. The position he had built up all lost, as he saw it. Marie inherited everything, of course." Dr. Kirkus sighed.

"Was he really so much to blame?"

"Who can tell? It's difficult to control the young. *We* know that, all right." She gestured round her, although there were in fact no students present in the Senior Common Room. "It wasn't helpful that the young man had been a kind of suitor of Marie's, I gather, and the old man didn't like him very much." Another sigh. "But Alec, of all people, to bring that up! He is very interested in wine, we all know that—rather boringly so sometimes, dare I say it? But that was carrying an interest altogether too far. Alec—who I had seen as Marie's protector in a way since his own wife died, or at least supporter. In her not altogether happy situation. I'm sure you understand what I mean." Dr. Kirkus looked significantly toward Claire and Paddy, now having a conversation in the other corner of the room which was all too visibly intimate. Claire looked particularly pretty, animated; she had the air of persuading Paddy to something.

"Marie and Paddy married shortly after her father's death. He was a postgraduate student up there: that's his field, Scottish studies of sorts. Too soon perhaps for either of them. It meant that Marie never went on with her own work. A pity, there's a proper intelligence there. And they really are such different characters. She's very reserved. That wine-throwing, so public, is quite a new departure. As for Paddy, I'm fond of him, but I've come to the conclusion his mind is essentially lightweight."

For all the pleasantness of her tone, Dr. Kirkus did not fail to make it clear that the word "lightweight" was, in her vocabulary, one of extreme moral disapproval. Inwardly, Jemima quailed: that kind of judgment took her back all too rapidly to Cambridge and certain dons she had known there. Had her speech been lightweight, she wondered? Could anything to do with television be other than lightweight in the opinion of Dr. Kirkus (who had, by the way, alone among the diners, not congratulated Jemima upon her performance).

"I had to reprove Paddy just a little in a review in *Literature* once."

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Elena Kirkus smiled reminiscently. Her gentle smile was really more terrifying than her frown, Jemima decided. Dr. Kirkus looked round her. "Alec Redding, now, with all his faults, there's a first-rate mind. As for your young friend—"

They were interrupted by Claire herself. "Paddy's taking my car," she announced swiftly. "It's ridiculous for him to get a taxi to go all the way to that remote place at this time of night, even if he could. And of course he must go and see if Marie's all right. No, don't be silly, Paddy. How could I possibly need it myself? I'm here with Jemima till dawn, aren't I, discussing the good old days. Everyone drives my car. Everyone except Alec," she said, drawing the Professor into the conversation, "he's too snobbish about cars."

"Too knowledgeable maybe: not always the same thing." It was Dr. Kirkus in her tart way who came to Alec Redding's defense, as though regretting her earlier attack. The Professor himself remained silent.

But Claire rattled on regardless: "Oh, go on, Paddy, take it."

How elated she was! And Claire's careless generosity with her possessions reminded Jemima of the vivid girl she had known at Cambridge: there was something voluptuous about such generosity, as though Claire was secretly signaling: Have me, too.

Jemima was to remember that elation further on during the evening when Claire outlined in private a less than happy situation. The words, both sad and sadly familiar, tumbled out.

"She simply doesn't understand him, she can't seem to make an effort—that awful wine-throwing was about the most positive thing I can remember Marie *doing* in public. She's silent most of the time. No one knows what she's thinking." And so on and so on.

At the same time, another picture was emerging, a picture of a large comfortable country house, way beyond any don's salary, situated in a picturesque Mallow country village far from the bustling university town. Here lived a withdrawn and wealthy woman and her good-looking, unfaithful husband—and as far as Jemima could make out, there was no real sign of this menage, happy or unhappy, coming to an end. The ugly—or encouraging—word "divorce" was not mentioned by Claire at any point, she noted.

At one point Claire even said: "Sometimes I hate him! I wish he were dead. No, I wish *I* were dead. It's just that I hate him for being so weak. He'll never leave her—her and her lovely money. Oh, forget it, Jemima, I think I'm rather drunk." She had indeed polished off

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most of a bottle of red wine—no Chambertin this, but some rougher vintage designed for late-drinking, when it headed in the general direction of oblivion. Jemima herself drank one glass and stopped.

So it could hardly have been the wine which gave her such disturbed dreams and half waking reflections. Perhaps it was the tension still lingering from her speech on the one hand and an unexpectedly fraught social evening on the other. In particular the lines of the old ballad began to weave through her brain in zany fashion, rearranging themselves in new patterns:

"The Professor held up his blude-red wine—
O who will answer this question of mine?"

Other lines came back to her: the ominous presage to Sir Patrick Spens' journey when his servant had seen "the new moon with the auld one in her arms."

A doomed expedition. She began to drift again and the lines drifted with her: "The new woman with the old man in her arms—O who will answer this question of mine?"

When Jemima did wake up—to the urgent pleading summons of Claire Donahue—the latter's ravaged face and desperate cry seemed to come straight out of her threatening dream.

"He's dead!" she was saying. "Oh, Christ, how shall I bear it? What shall I do? He's dead!"

"Of course he's dead," muttered Jemima stupidly. She was still within the ballad's nightmare. "Sir Patrick Spens is dead." Luckily Claire didn't seem to hear her.

"Paddy," she was wailing over and over again. "Paddy—oh, Paddy!"

Throughout the day which followed, Jemima saw it as her duty to remain in Mallow: it would hardly be honorable to depart hastily for London in the wake of such a ghastly tragedy. Besides, she could support Claire.

The details of Paddy Mayall's death gradually emerged. None were pleasant. First it transpired that he had crashed his car—Claire's car—through Mallow's historic medieval bridge and into the Avon below. The car appeared to have gone out of control, or else he had taken the bridge too fast in the darkness. He had then drowned in the fast-flowing, storm-swollen river. Perhaps he had hit his head first and been knocked unconscious, but that was not yet known for certain. All that was bad enough. Worse was to follow in the afternoon . . .

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"The police," Claire said in a dull voice, tears temporarily stilled. "The police have been to see me. Because it was my car. They think it may have been tampered with, fixed in some way. The brake-linings were virtually severed and then—he didn't get very far, did he?" She was beginning to tremble again. "I don't understand about cars, but I wasn't careless about *that* kind of thing, it had only just come back from the garage. If someone did it on purpose, who on earth would want to kill *me?*" Claire ended on a piteous note.

Then she gasped. "Oh, my God, are they suggesting *I* killed Paddy?" She began to weep again. "How could they believe that? How could anyone? He should never have been driving. If only Marie hadn't run off like that, if only Alec hadn't got going on the subject of his stupid bloody wine! Oh, curse him for it—that started the whole thing off!"

"Wait a minute." The haunting images of the night were beginning to reform in Jemima's mind, at first in spite of herself, and then in a more purposeful fashion. "O who will answer this question of mine?" She let the images have their way. And began to see what an answer to the question might be.

It was Dr. Kirkus to whom she posed it. She found the older woman seated in the college library in front of a large open book—but her attitude indicated mourning rather than her reading. Her spectacles lay useless beside the book.

"I was very fond of Paddy." Her manner was composed as ever. "Lightweight maybe in intelligence, but yet—" She stopped. For once she appeared to be at a loss how to go on. Jemima took the opportunity to ask her a question.

Other questions and other answers would follow. The police would later fill in all the grisly details of the truth in their patient, relentless, and, on the whole, admirable manner. But before that process could get under way, Jemima had to put her own question.

"Why do you ask me?" Dr. Kirkus looked steadily at her.

"You have a first-class mind." Jemima's smile was not without irony. She added, "And, besides, you know them."

"Yes," said Dr. Kirkus after a long silence. "It could have happened like that. It would have been in both their characters. Certainly what seemed outwardly to take place was not in either of them. So the evidence suggests—" She paused to assume her spectacles. "I was very surprised by Alec even at the time, and even more surprised by Marie."

It was a judgment, the first judgment but not the last, on Professor

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Redding and his mistress, Marie Mayall, for the murder of her husband Paddy.

When you looked at the events of the previous night from another angle, thought Jemima afterward, how simple they seemed: planned with the same determination as her own speech, but with none of the same reluctance. A clever man, sexually active, with a taste for high living, determined to marry his less intelligent colleague's wealthy wife. The fact that the aforesaid colleague hadn't the sense to be faithful but actively philandered with a member of the same college was simply an added bonus. With Marie—reserved but passionate—in his thrall, it was easy for Alec Redding to devise his own very public insult. Then Marie's carefully coached response followed, which got her away from the dinner and home to safety in her own car.

The inevitable offer of another car—Claire's car—came next: inevitable because Claire famously lent out her car, and since she was due to spend the night talking to her old friend, she would scarcely need it herself. Redding's stained shirt was then the perfect excuse for him to leave the hall and fix the brakes—Redding, who was "snobbish" but also "knowledgeable" about cars. As for the brakes, supposing suspicion fell afterward: where was it likely to fall but on Claire herself? Claire—who was jealous of her lover's refusal to leave his rich wife.

"I wish he were dead," Claire had told Jemima in a fit of drunken despair. Might not she have told others the same thing?

Even if that accident had failed, the blood—the blood red as wine—of Paddy Mayall would have flowed sooner or later. The new woman was to have the old man in her arms. Paddy Mayall's tragedy had been ordained as surely as that of Sir Patrick Spens, even if it was less noble.

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a *NEW* short story by

JOSEPH HANSEN

Molly's mind had never been quick. As a girl, it had hurt her when other girls said so, made fun of her, called her Molly the Moron. Time had taught her that, though cruel, they were right. She was not clever. If she'd been clever, Carl Wynant would never have been able to trick her as he did. But she can get even with him now.

Look for a new novel by Joseph Hansen from Viking/Penguin soon. And "Molly's Aim" will also appear in the next SoCal anthology, Murder, California Style II . . .

MOLLY'S AIM

by JOSEPH HANSEN

The town of Poinsettia waits among brown rolling hills under a high, wide, blue California sky for something to happen. And it never will. That's how Molly feels. It never will. Time stands still here. Poised on a corner now, waiting for one of the little town's two stoplights to change—main street is a State Highway, and strangers can come speeding out of the hills and around the curve and be surprised by the town—she looks up and down the street and sees the same dowdy one- and two-story brick store buildings she's seen her whole life long here—all thirty years of it.

Two cars streak past, filled with kids bound for the Consolidated High School. They shriek and laugh. Arms wave out of windows. A soda-pop can goes flying. Molly aches for a moment at the sight, the sounds. She wishes she were back in high school. Those were the good times. The light changes, and she crosses the street.

The Sleep EZ motel is tucked back among old eucalyptuses with thick, twisted trunks at the south end of town. She has worked here

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ten years already. And she can't see how she'll ever leave. The door to the office is plate glass. She pushes inside. A bald head is visible behind the woodgrain plastic counter. Molly says cheerily:

"Good morning, Mr. Gobineau."

He wakes with a snort, blinks at her, pushes to his feet. It must take effort. He is a big-bellied man. "Ten o'clock already?" He winces at the daylight pouring in through the glass door. "Another fine day, I see."

"The ranchers want rain." Molly studies the registration cards in a loose-leaf contraption on the counter to learn the numbers of the occupied units. From the automobiles on the weedy tarmac of the parking area, she knows how many. Five. It's been a quiet night.

She glances at the vinyl-tile floor of the office. A quick damp mopping will do for it. Checking for dust and disorder, she eyes the fake-leather chairs, the woodgrain-plastic coffee table with its vase of plastic flowers, ragged travel magazines, ashtray. Some dog has streaked the glass door with its nose. After she changes from her jeans and sweater into white smock and trousers, she will take spray cleaner and paper towels to the door. She wants to keep busy until checkout time at eleven, when she can get into the units, clean up after the guests, change the bedding and towels.

But now she frowns. Has she really seen that name? She turns back to the registration cards. Her small hands flip them over swiftly. There. Is she right about that name? She traces the letters with a finger. She never really got the hang of reading. She must be wrong. *Hugh Henderson?* She makes a little sound. She's dizzy. Her knees feel weak. She catches the edge of the counter to steady herself.

Mr. Gobineau's brows rise. "What's the matter? You're pale. Are you sick?"

She gives him what she knows must be a wan little smile. "I'm just a little dizzy."

What shall she do? She isn't ready. For twelve years she's wished for this to happen, wished so fiercely she sometimes thought she'd die from wanting it—that Hugh Henderson would return to Poinsettia. Now it's happened, and she has no plans.

"Sit down," Mr. Gobineau says. "I'll call Mrs. Gobineau. Here—" the big green Arrowhead bottle back of the counter gurgles and he passes her a paper cup of water "—drink this." He lumbers away, panicked, calling, "Marie, come quickly—Molly's sick!"

Molly doesn't drink the water, doesn't sit down. She stands at the

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counter, her heart beating heavily, thickly. Her voice sounds strange and high to her as she asks Mr. Gobineau's worried old face, "Hugh Henderson—why did he stop here? Why not at his mother's house? His house. Where he grew up?"

"Henderson?" Gobineau squints at the registry card. "Ah, that young man. Well, it was late when he arrived. Perhaps he didn't want to awaken his mother."

"She died," Molly says. "Day before yesterday."

"Ah, then he's here for the funeral," Mr. Gobineau says. He peers at her. "You know him?"

Molly must be careful. She's already said too much. She stammers quickly, "No—not really. We—we went to high school together is all."

Mr. Gobineau cocks a sly eyebrow. "You're blushing. He was your childhood sweetheart, no?"

She laughs. She can't help it. Little scrawny Hugh, with his big brown eyes in a face that even when he was a high-school senior looked like a ten-year-old girl's? What a silly idea. It was tall, strapping, fair-haired Carl Wynant who was Molly's sweetheart. For a dreamy moment now, she glows with remembered pride in that. Then the old black rage rises in her, so strongly that she feels dizzy again.

Motherly little Mrs. Gobineau hurries in and Molly gives her a wan smile. "I—I'm sorry. I didn't have such a good night. The pizza I ate or something." She turns for the door, acting weaker than she really feels. "I'd better—better go home and rest today." Hand on the door, she turns back. "Can you manage without me?"

Mrs. Gobineau waddles to her, gives her a hug with her soft fat arm, her pillowy old face wrinkled with concern. "Yes, yes, I'll manage, *ma petite*. You stop at the doctor. Telephone us. Tell us how you are."

"Thank you," Molly says, and pushes out into the warm sunshine.

She's frightened at having left work. She never did this to the Gobineaus before. She mustn't lose her job. Who else would hire her? Not Snyder's Luncheonette. Mrs. Snyder died and the cafe's been sold. The Snyders and the Gobineaus didn't care that Molly can't read or write or figure and has to have things explained to her so often. When the Gobineaus are gone, who else will be so patient and kind? What will become of Molly if she loses the friendship of the Gobineaus?

She stops at her corner and stands breathing quickly, excited,

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frightened, watching for speeding cars. It can't be helped. She needs time to think and plan. Anyway, at the motel, Hugh might see her and that could ruin everything. She crosses the street and, padding along quickly in her soft-soled shoes, makes for the haven of her rooms, where she can be alone and decide what to do.

Her mind has never been quick. As a girl, it had hurt her when other girls said so, made fun of her, called her Molly the Moron. Time has taught her that, though cruel, they were right. She is not clever. If she'd been clever, Carl would never have been able to trick her as he did. But—she sets her jaw and works the latch of the wire-mesh gate to the yard of old grapefruit trees—she can get even with him now.

She closes the gate and walks up the cement strip beside an old white-frame house to a side door at the rear and her little apartment. Inside, in her tiny kitchen, she takes a Coke from the shivery old fridge, sits down at the paint-faded table, and lights a cigarette. She pops the top of the dewy can and swallows some of the cold, sweet, tingly drink. If she takes her time now, she can make a plan. She has no choice. Her chance has come at last, and it may be the only one she ever gets. She frowns, trying to concentrate.

But her thinking is all a jumble. She jumps up impatiently, goes to the window over the chipped sink, stares out at the only view, the side of the neighbor's paint-scaly garage. If she can't think, she can remember. Sometimes she wishes she couldn't. But remember she can and does.

If she's lucky, her memories are of the happy high-school times. There had been boys. They never mocked her as the girls did. They bought her beers and fried chicken, and took her to drive-in movies in their cars, and out into the hills—or sometimes even to the far-off beach—to make love afterward. And if this one didn't ask her a second time, there'd soon be another, and another. She loved high school.

Her childhood had been a nightmare. After her mother died, her father snarled at her sober and hit her when he was drunk. She didn't want to anger him, but she couldn't understand what he wanted. His temper made her jumpy, and she kept breaking things and breaking rules and not living up to her mother. Not in looks, not in brains, not in anything. Except her aim with a gun. He was proud of that—when he remembered it, which was less and less often as time went by.

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Molly was worst of all at cooking. The meals she fixed on her own her father pushed away. Sometimes he threw the plate at her. She took to heating TV dinners. And grew grateful for the times, more and more common as the years passed, when he snored unshaven, mouth hanging open, unconscious from whiskey in his chair facing the television set, or felt too awful even to get out of his bed, sometimes for days at a time.

But this meant he couldn't get work. He was good and quick and sure at fixing up whatever needed mending—plumbing, wiring, roofing—on ranches and in town. But he got so unreliable, promising to show up and not showing up until days later, that finally the phone stopped ringing.

A trickle of money came every month from a tiny trust fund of her mother's, but it wasn't enough, so Molly had to take work to bring in extra. A half crippled old widower, Morgan Dowd, had her in for a couple of hours after school every other day to dust and vacuum his big empty old house, do the laundry, wash up the dishes, scrub the bathrooms, shop for groceries, pick up his prescriptions from the drugstore.

She had one dream in those grim years. To escape.

First she'd escaped into heavy makeup and flashy costume jewelry from Woolworth's, into dresses too old for her, into smoking, flirting, drinking beer and wine, talking sexy with the boys. Into having sex with the boys, when she learned that was what drew them. Other girls were prettier, other girls had better families, nicer houses, more money, even cars of their own, other girls got better grades. But the boys liked Molly and she liked the boys.

Still, she hadn't been prepared for Carl Wynant. Carl was the star of the football team, captain of the basketball team, a four-hundred hitter in baseball. On the big campus of the Consolidated High School, among a thousand kids from all over this side of the county, he was the best known. He could have the company of pretty girls, rich girls, girls who got all A's. But it was Molly Byrne he picked.

In the cafeteria at lunch one day when it was raining so hard no one had gone off campus to get decent food—pizza or burritos or Big Macs—she asked him why. She knew it was dumb of her even as the question came out of her mouth between bites of meatloaf and mashed potatoes. A girl should be grateful for a miracle like Carl and not mess with his head. But not knowing was driving her wild. She had to ask him. He stared at her for a minute, surprised, and then he laughed. She felt cold. Was he laughing at her?

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He swallowed the food in his mouth, gulped milk, and grinned at her. "They don't really want me, Molly. They just want to show the other girls they can corner the big man on campus. I'm a trophy. They're hunters."

"I think you're great," Molly said.

"I'm not. I'm good at sports, that's all. And what is this?" He gestured to take in not just the wide, chattery, clattery cafeteria, but the campus and all its buildings. "High school in the boonies. I'm a star here, but I wouldn't be nothing at a school with real competition."

"You could be anything you want, Carl," she said.

He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and crumpled it into a ball, tossing it at the head of a boy seated across the room. It hit its mark, and the boy looked around to see where it came from, but couldn't see. Carl snorted laughter and turned to Molly, sober again. "None of those girls would dream of marrying me, Molly."

"Why not? Of course they would."

He counted on his strong fingers. "I'm poor, I got no background, I got no future—"

Molly took his hand, squeezed it, looked into his blue, blue eyes. "I don't think that's true. But even if it is, I still love you."

He nodded and stood. "We're two of a kind." He picked up his dishes, piled them on her tray, and picked up her tray. "Come on," he said. "I need you, Molly. Right now."

She scurried after him. "But the rain, Carl."

"I've got the truck today," he said.

It was a ratty old truck with fading red paint and a scaling sign on its doors: WYNANT'S EGGS. It smelled of chickens. She knew where he was taking her. Copenhagen—a long-deserted ranch whose house had burned down but whose barn still stood, bearing on one side a weather-bleached advertisement for Copenhagen snuff. She didn't know what snuff was, or Copenhagen, either, but Copenhagen was what they called the place. Carl wasn't the only one who knew about it—it was whispered about among the older students, giggled about, but she knew of no one else who ever actually used it. Carl called it his place, and she went along with his make believe. It made her feel warm inside.

It wasn't warm inside the barn. It was cold and damp. They climbed to the haymow up a splintery ladder. The rain pattered softly on the shingles. Carl crossed deep straw and dug the rolled-

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up sleeping bag from a corner. It was the kind with zippers all around so it could be spread out. Its black satiny lining always felt luscious on her skin.

They undressed each other, stopping for long kisses, long fondlings, shivering in the weather but not noticing that they were shivering, warmed from within themselves by the heat of their blood. They dropped, already joined where they both craved wildly to be joined, onto the padded, satiny bed on the deep springy straw.

Afterward, Carl turned away for an instant and stretched an arm to get cigarettes from his castoff jacket, lighted one for himself, one for her, and lay naked, blond, shining, hair in his eyes, leaning up on an elbow, looking down at her thoughtfully. "You really like it," he said. "You like doing all the different things, don't you?"

"All of them." She pushed up to kiss his smoky mouth. "Don't you?"

"Hell, yes, but that's different—boys are horny. Girls aren't supposed to be horny, you know."

"Who says?" she scoffed. Then she was grave again. "I love you, Carl."

"Same here." He got up off the sleeping bag and stood looking down at her. "I love you, too, Molly."

She knelt up and rubbed her face against his flat, hard belly. "You're wonderful."

He laughed softly, stroked her hair, and turned away to balance first on one leg, then the other, and pull on jockey shorts. "What do you think?" he said, and drew a T-shirt on over his head. "Do you want us to be together forever?" He smoothed the shirt down.

"Can we?" She could hardly believe what he was asking. Her heart thudded. "Do you mean it?"

"Hell, yes." He kicked into his jeans. "Only not like this. Not here, Molly, not in Poinsettia. Not with your drunk father. Not with my mother and her damn ten thousand chickens and nothing ahead but eggs and more eggs forever." He zipped up the jeans. "With maybe ten dollars between us for a Friday-night Chinese supper in Atascadero and a movie afterward." He flapped into his checkered flannel shirt and poked the tails down into his pants. "I'm sick of being poor. I'm sick of working my ass off for nothing." He sat down to pull on thick white gym socks and then the short strapped motorcycle boots he always wore. "Aren't you sick of being poor?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Only, what can we do about it? I can't get a

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good job. I don't know anything. There's no money to send me to college. And if there was, I couldn't go. I'm a very poor student."

He laughed that grim laugh of his again. "Yeah, that's another way we're alike." He gathered up his jacket and walked to the ladder, the planks of the loft creaking under his weight. "Come on—" he looked at the watch they gave him after last year's football season "—it's after three. My mom will chew me out. And you'll be late to old man Dowd's." He started down the ladder. "You know what they say? He's got money hidden all over that house." He made a heavy thump as he landed on the barn floor below. "Is it true, Molly?"

"People make up stories," she said.

"Maybe not," he called up to her. "Why don't you nose around and find out?"

Molly now almost believes she did eat tainted pizza last night. She feels a little nauseated and goes to lie on her bed. It makes up into a sofa if she wants, but ordinarily she doesn't do the stowing of pillows and heavy lifting needed to make the bed part disappear. She gets enough of that kind of work at the Sleep EZ, and she's usually tired when she comes home.

At the motel, when she's cleaning the rooms, she ordinarily switches on the television sets. She could switch her own set on now. But she doesn't. She just pries off her shoes, lies down in her jeans and sweater, puts two pillows under her head, and gazes at the leaf-shadowed open window, where a hot breeze moves the half drawn roller shade so it ticks against the frame.

And she thinks of Hugh Henderson, who has come home to bury his mother. It never came to Molly that Mrs. Henderson would die. Why not? Everybody dies at last. And mostly when they do, their relations—certainly their sons and daughters—come home. But maybe because nothing good ever happens to her she'd settled in her mind that Hugh Henderson wouldn't. True, what happened was a long time ago—but because so little ever does happen in Poinsettia, when there's a scandal people remember, and Hugh would know that. Yet come home he has. She can't believe her luck.

But how is she going to take advantage of it? She scowls. It's back to planning again, isn't it? And her mind shies from the assignment. The thought of it wears her out before she can begin. Instead, she slides once more into remembering—this time how it came about that little Hugh Henderson, who had adored big Carl Wynant, came to hate him . . .

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For a long while, that spring term of 1977, he tagged Carl around—in the school hallways, across the campus under the oaks and pepper trees. He was always there, sitting alone, a frail figure on the forsaken bleachers snapping picture after picture of Carl at afternoon batting practice, footracing, jumping hurdles on the gravel track—even, Molly was told, in the locker room, hanging around among the big, shower-sleek bodies of the athletes. That camera around his neck seemed part of Hugh. He wore it everywhere, every day, all day.

Toward the end, he and Carl began to eat lunch together, to drive together in Carl's truck to movies in Paso Robles or Santa Maria on Friday and Saturday nights. At least once, they traveled to the coast on a Sunday—they were seen sailing at Morro Bay. Then somebody started the rumor that they were gay. Flowers appeared in Carl's locker with a card signed *To Carl with all my love—Hugh*. The girls all chattered and giggled about it.

Then someone stole the white stuff they used to draw lines on the football field and printed out there in letters four feet high CARL WYNANT LOVES HUGH HENDERSON with a heart with an arrow through it. The coaches pretended to make a big fuss about this, but they never caught who did it. They tried to rub out the words, wash them out with hoses, but the words stayed till next fall's football games scuffed them away. And the coaches grinned. They thought it was funny, too. Anyone could see that.

Carl didn't grin. He hated being laughed at. He hated being called queer. The next Saturday night, he filled the truck with his best jock friends, and picked up Hugh. They took him out in the hills and stripped him and made him do things to them, and did things to him, and then brought him back and dumped him, kicked, beaten, bleeding, and stark naked in the center of town, in front of the post office and the lighted stores, and drove off. A lot of people were still awake and saw Hugh stumbling miserably home through the streets. They weren't scandalized at what had happened to him. They were scandalized because he didn't have any clothes on.

The sheriff questioned Carl and the other boys, but they wouldn't tell on each other and no one was arrested. But at Snyder's Luncheonette—where Molly, even though she couldn't write down the orders or add up the checks, sometimes helped out if Wilma Snyder was sick—the breakfasters agreed it was Carl and his friends who'd done it. And Carl himself told Molly about it the next year, one of those good times when they lay naked in the dark. At first it fright-

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ened her to know Carl could do such a thing, but she soon forgot about it. He wasn't cruel, he was only protecting his reputation. He wasn't gay. Those other boys forced him to prove it.

And Hugh wasn't killed, after all, only bruised and shamed. He left town, not waiting for the semester to end. His mother claimed not to know where he had gone. So no one could ask him how he felt. But Molly knew. He hated Carl, with the same betrayed fury Molly later came to feel, and still feels. She's had to keep her hatred secret, but everyone, including the sheriff, knows Hugh has to be Carl's enemy.

And now Hugh is back, and Molly can have her revenge on Carl at last—if only she can figure out how to make the sheriff pin the blame on Hugh.

An hour later she's back in the kitchen, seated at the table, drinking another Coke and struggling to put a plan onto paper. It's old, unused notebook paper from her high-school days. She rarely put anything on paper then, and it's hard for her to form words now. She does it like a kindergartner, one crooked letter at a time. She thought it would help keep her mind from wandering. And maybe it has a little. It's also given her a headache.

CARL, she has printed, HUGH, MOLLY, and CARL'S COME-ON-INN. She has drawn lines radiating out from these last words so it will look as if they're shining like the sign on top of Carl's roadhouse on the highway outside town. She has rung Information and written down the telephone numbers of the nightclub and the Henderson house. But none of it gets her anyplace.

The one thing that makes her feel that somehow what she must do she is going to do is the 30-30 rifle she's pulled out of the back of a closet, dusted off, cleaned, oiled, and loaded. It now stands leaning against the side of the stove, the rifle she bought quietly in San Luis Obispo to replace her father's, which she lost on that most terrible night of all her life, twelve years ago. The new rifle cost her all her pitiful savings and she was scared to death her father would discover it wasn't his gun, but he was so drunk most of the time she could only hope he wouldn't notice—and he didn't. Or if he did, he never said so.

When she and Carl lay on the sleeping bag again in the loft at Copenhagen, she told him how, the day before when it turned cold in the late afternoon, she'd gone back to Mr. Dowd's house to fetch the coat she'd forgotten and there in the dining room was the old

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man, down on his bony knees, a corner of the carpet folded back, prying up a square of the parquet floor. He took out a fishing-tackle box, opened it, and pushed paper money into it, quite a thick stack, to lie on top of stacks already in the box. Not then—they had other things to occupy them then—but when they were driving back to town in the egg truck, they planned what they would do. As she climbed down out of the truck at her front gate, Carl leaned across the seat and told her in a loud whisper, "Bring your father's gun."

She slid it from under her father's bed, where he'd sprawled in his filthy clothes, whiskery, reeking of drink, snoring like a pig. It never occurred to her to ask what they would need with a gun. She took it because that was what Carl said to do. She had a key, of course, and when she softly unlocked the back door of Mr. Dowd's tall house on its ten-acre lot that cold night and they tiptoed into the dark kitchen, Carl was carrying the gun in one gloved hand.

Molly's heart pounded with fright. It made a roaring in her ears so she could hardly hear. Not that there was much to hear—crickets out in the darkness, now and then a car droning along the distant highway. The neighborhood was asleep, the town was asleep. Carl groped for her hand and she guided him into the dining room, where the long, polished table, its erect and empty chairs, and the big mirrored sideboard were no more than darker chunks of the darkness.

"Where?" Carl whispered.

Mutely, on trembling legs, Molly led him to the corner where a little sidetable held a clutch of silver vessels—coffeepot, sugar bowl, and cream pitcher—on a silver tray. They glinted in the starlight through the windows. One of Molly's duties was to polish them once a month—though they were never used. No one came to dinner at the Dowd house, not after Mrs. Dowd died.

"Show me," Carl whispered.

Molly knelt, and pushed his legs so he stepped aside. She folded back the corner of the carpet. "There," she whispered back and jumped up as quickly as if she'd uncovered a snake. She didn't want to touch the square of flooring.

Carl did. He handed her the rifle. She cradled it in her arm, as her father had taught her, and Carl knelt and felt around with his hands.

The next minute she heard a little squeak and saw a square hole open at his knees. He laid the patch of flooring aside, reached down,

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and lifted out the fishing-tackle box. It wasn't locked. He opened it, pawed inside, laughed a soft laugh, straightened up. And his head struck the table. The silver pieces rattled. The coffeepot teetered and gonged on the bare floor.

"Who's there?"

It was Mr. Dowd's voice. He wasn't upstairs. He was very near. Molly heard his slippers scuffing across the hallway into the living room, only a few paces away. He walked with a cane and couldn't get downstairs fast, so he must have been lying awake and heard the truck arrive, heard them enter the kitchen.

In his bathrobe and slippers, his thin grey hair mussed from sleep, he was pointing the beam of a flashlight around. "Who's there?" he said again in his high, trembly voice. Then the flashlight beam caught her full in the face and held her. "Molly? Is that you?"

Carl clapped a hand over her mouth, and somehow the gun went off. It made a terrible noise and gave a terrible kick that bruised her arm. She dropped it, but the harm was done—Mr. Dowd lay on his back in the gaping black opening to the living room. His dropped flashlight showed a dark stain spreading on his chest. He didn't make a sound.

Carl pushed her out of his way, ran to the old man, and knelt beside him. He picked up the flashlight and shone it on his face, touched the scrawny neck, grabbed a limp wrist, held it for a minute, and dropped it. He turned and looked at Molly. "You've killed him." He stuffed the flashlight in a pocket of his jacket and came striding back to her. He grabbed her and shook her so hard it seemed her head would snap off. "You've killed him! What the hell did you do that for?"

"I—I didn't mean to," Molly gabbled. "The gun just went off! The light was in my eyes and the gun just went off!"

"Yeah, wonderful." Carl flung her backward. She struck the little table, and the other silver pieces clattered to the floor. She stood huddled against the wall, looking at him wide-eyed. He crouched, grabbing up the metal box and the rifle. "You stupid cow. I should have known you were too dumb for this."

"Carl, don't," she begged. "It was an accident."

He went to her, pushed his face close to hers, furious. "It was murder in the course of a robbery. You get the death penalty for that, Molly—they put you in the gas chamber."

Molly reached out to him. "No, Carl. I didn't mean it."

He slapped her hands away. "Don't touch me." He held up the

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box. "We were going to have a great life. I'll bet there are thousands in here, Molly. We could have gone anywhere, done anything."

"We still can." She turned toward the kitchen swing door. "Let's go, Carl. Like we planned."

"Oh, no—" he caught her arm "—I don't want any part of you. I'm going alone. You worked for Dowd. You'll be the first one they suspect. You don't dare leave town."

Molly could only stare.

"They'd come straight after you, Molly. Anyway, you think I'm teaming up with a killer? You think I'd put my life in your hands?" He gestured with the gun barrel at the body on the floor. "After what you did? Think again. I'd have to sleep sometimes, Molly. Who says when I'm asleep, you wouldn't murder me and take it all for yourself? Oh, no. I'm going alone."

She shook her head in horrified protest. How could he be saying what he was saying? He yanked her against him—not lovingly, threateningly. "And if you got some idea of telling the sheriff about me, just remember I saw you kill the old man. And I've got the gun you did it with—your father's gun. They can match up the bullets. All I did was take the money. It was you that did the killing. You think you can remember that?"

He slammed open the swing door with a fist, dragged her with him through the kitchen, down the back steps and the long clod-stumbly orchard to the truck. "Come on, I'll drop you home." He yanked open the door, pushed her roughly up into the cab, and slammed the door. He walked around the truck, set the cash box on the gritty floor, dropped the gun back of the seats, got in, and started the noisy engine.

"Take me with you, Carl," she begged. "You promised."

"That was before I knew you were a killer," he said.

She hiked back to Mr. Dowd's house after school the next day. It was one of her days to go there and clean for him and she had to act as if everything was the same as ever. Her legs felt weak when she climbed the back steps. She trembled all over when she stepped into the daylit kitchen and heard the silence of the house, and knew the reason for the silence.

She pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and sat down. She didn't want to go any farther. But she made herself. She pushed the swing door and entered the dining room. She looked at the fallen

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silver pieces, the folded back corner of the rug, the square of flooring, the hole it had concealed. But she couldn't look at Mr. Dowd.

There was no way to get to the telephone but to pass him, though. She went to the opening, looking at the table and chairs, the sideboard, the windows, the ceiling, anything but the dead body in the opening. Feeling as if she might faint, she slipped past it, edging around the door-frame, then ran through the living room, and in the hallway snatched up the receiver of the telephone on the table there and dialed zero.

"What was in there, Molly?" The bony sheriff tapped the edge of the hole in the floor with his boot. "Do you know?"

Molly shook her head.

"Hid money in there, did he?" The sheriff smiled—he had horsy teeth. His thick glasses glinted. "Old people get funny ideas sometimes. Don't trust banks. Stuff money all sorts of crazy places, you'd be surprised."

He turned to watch the young men who had come in a county ambulance load the stiff body of Mr. Dowd onto a stretcher and carry him down the living room and out of sight into the hallway. The front door opened and closed. The shoes of the men thumped across the hollow front porch and down the steps. The doors of the ambulance slammed.

"I don't know anything about it," Molly said.

"It looks as if Mr. Dowd caught the robber in the act and the robber shot him."

"I suppose so," Molly said.

"Mr. Dowd keep a gun, did he? Hunting rifle?"

"He did say sometimes he'd like to shoot the deer eating the bark off his fruit trees. Maybe he had a gun in a closet someplace, but he was old and sick. I guess he wouldn't be using it, would he?"

"Maybe when he heard the robber," the sheriff said, "he got it out of that closet, came downstairs with it, and the robber just took it away from him and shot him with it."

She looked at the floor. "That's terrible," she said.

"He should have phoned us, not tried to take care of it himself. I don't know when people will get that idea through their heads." The sheriff pushed back his flat-brimmed hat with one finger and studied her. "Old people that hide money in the house usually lock up tight at night. But we can't find any sign of a break-in. Robber

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just walked in. The front door was locked—downstairs windows, too. What about that, Molly? Did he usually leave the back door open?"

"It was always locked when I got here to work," she said. "He gave me a key to let myself in."

The sheriff's eyebrows went up. "Did he, now?" He tilted his head, blinking. "Have you got that key now?"

She showed it to him. He took it and turned it over in his fingers. "Lend this to anybody last night?"

She shook her head. "Can I go now?"

"In a minute." The sheriff pocketed the key. "Did he have any visitors lately? Strangers?"

"Nobody came but Dr. Keinplatz," she said.

"No delivery men, anybody like that?"

"I used his car and did his shopping for him," she said. "Groceries, drugstore. I did the laundry. I drove him to the bank. Nobody delivered anything, except the mailman."

"No repairman, gas, electricity, plumber?"

"Not that I ever saw."

"And you never told anyone he had money hidden here?"

"I didn't know," she said again. "Can I go now?"

"You got a boy friend?" He showed his horsy teeth again. "Pretty girl like you must have a boy friend."

She felt herself blush hotly and her heart began to pound. "I don't have time. I go to school, and keep house here, and wait tables at the cafe, and look after my father. I don't have time for boy friends."

Into his pale, vague eyes behind the thick lenses came a pitying look. He patted her shoulder kindly. "Well, don't fret. You will have. Some rich young fella will see you one day at the cafe, decide he can't live without you, and take you off to the bright lights and the big city."

"I guess not," she said.

Mr. Dowd was buried—a very old sister-in-law from the Midwest came to see to all of it, a creaky little woman who left straight after the funeral. She and Molly were the only ones in the pews of the big, high-raftered Presbyterian church, and the only ones at the graveside.

Molly kept fearing that the sheriff would question her again. At home, she nervously peered out the front windows, expecting to see him coming up the walk, bony in his carefully pressed tan uniform. Or maybe he'd come banging in at the screen door of the cafe one

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morning and put handcuffs on her and drag her away to jail. She imagined him asking around the high school and finding some girl who'd tell him Molly had lied to him—she did have a boy friend, and it was Carl Wynant. And then the sheriff would go to Carl's mother's chicken ranch and find out he had left town the very night Mr. Dowd was killed.

She would see the sheriff in his patrol car sometimes when she was out on the streets. He seemed to gaze at her long and thoughtfully. But he never said a word. If he noticed her noticing him, he'd nod and touch the brim of his hat. But every time she saw him, it made her jumpy. She lay awake worrying about the sheriff.

"What's the matter with you?" her father growled at her over the breakfast table. "You look half dead. If you don't stop running around all night with the boys, you'll end up pregnant. Well, when you do, don't expect any help from me."

That was a laugh. When had he ever helped her? Not since her mother died and he started drinking. After that, she was the one who did all the helping. "I don't run around with any boys," she said. "That's over with."

"Glad to hear it," he sneered. "When you going to get another job? Only one creature I know can live on air, and that's an orchid—and we ain't neither one of us orchids."

Dully, she picked up his empty plate and carried it with hers to the sink. "I talked to the people at the EZ motel. It's hard for them to keep maids. They're always leaving to go home to Mexico. Maybe they'll take me on. They said they'd phone."

"Don't leave it up to them." Her father pushed up from his chair. "Keep going down there and reminding them."

"I will, Daddy," she said, and ran water into the sink.

She wondered what had become of Carl. Days slid into weeks, and weeks into months, but she couldn't get him out of her mind. Was it love or hate? It made her angry to admit it, after what he did to her, but she wanted to be with him again at Copenhagen. She couldn't forget him. Was he in Las Vegas, like he'd sometimes said? Wherever he was, she dreamed of getting on the Greyhound bus and going to look for him.

One Sunday, when she had time on her hands, she walked out to the chicken ranch and stood looking down the long, two-rut road at the small white house among walnut trees and the long whitewashed chicken sheds behind it. In vast pens, hundreds of white chickens

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pecked the dust. She touched the crusty steel latch of the gate, urging herself to push it up, swing the gate open, walk down the road, knock at the door, and, when Mrs. Wynant appeared, ask if she'd heard from Carl.

But of course she couldn't do that, could she? Mrs. Wynant would wonder what business Carl was of dumb little Molly Byrne's, anyway. She might get suspicious and demand to know what Molly knew about Carl and why he'd run off with the truck that night. Women weren't easy, like men, like the sheriff. Women weren't soft in the head when it came to dealing with a young girl if she'd interfered with one of their menfolk. Molly was afraid of Mrs. Wynant, and after that long, hot walk out to the chicken ranch she dropped her hand from the gate, turned, and trudged emptily back home.

At last a thing happened she would never have believed. Carl came back to Poinsettia. She smiles wryly to herself, now. It seemed as if she, the one who cared the most, was about the last person to hear of it. And no one told her—she overheard it. No one would think to tell her, she guessed. By now most of her high-school class had left town. Those able to go to college were over to Cal Poly in San Luis, or at UC Santa Barbara, or at the agricultural college in Davis. The others had to leave, too—there were no jobs in Poinsettia, not for bright people. They scattered to Los Angeles or San Francisco. Molly was about the only one who stayed.

She was working at the Sleep EZ by now, but they wanted her more and more at Snyder's Luncheonette, because Wilma was sick more and more of the time, so Molly worked twelve to fourteen hours a day sometimes and got home only to fall exhausted into bed. No time to watch TV or even listen to the radio. And she never read the papers—they were too hard.

So she heard it from a table of women from the bank and the Highway Patrol office eating early breakfast and gossiping about how the deserted roadhouse outside town had been sold to Carl Wynant.

"Wynant's Eggs?" one of the women said.

The other nodded. "That's the one."

"I remember him," a hatchet-faced woman said. "Big blond boy. Football player at the high school. Got into some kind of trouble with the sheriff once."

"I never thought he'd amount to anything."

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"Well," the first woman said, picking at her omelette, looking for more pieces of mushroom than there were, "you never can tell about youngsters. They grow up and surprise you."

"Where did he get the money? Could his mother afford to buy him a nightclub?"

One of the bank women laughed. "I handle her account. She can't save a dime. Just barely makes ends meet, poor woman, once she's paid the help. When she had a husband and son, it was different."

"Ranch hands won't work for their meals and a place to sleep any more," the woman with the omelette said. "Those days are gone forever."

"Why should trash like that work," the hatchet-faced woman said, "when they can live on welfare?"

"Isn't that the truth," the others said.

Mr. Snyder, red-faced in his chef's hat and apron, behind a service window filled with steaming plates, called impatiently for Molly and she wasn't able to stay and listen any more.

She waited in a latticework patio beside the newly painted roadhouse. Ferns hung up in pots, and new banana trees and flowering shrubs were stuck into corners. New redwood planks were underfoot. A jacaranda tree spread feathery shadows on the deck. Lacy white-metal chairs with designs pierced in the seats surrounded round white-metal tables. She sat at one of the tables. She was the only one here. It was early afternoon.

But the grand opening of Carl's Come-On-Inn happened last Saturday night. She'd walked out, footsore, after Snyder's closed and seen the gravel parking area beside the highway filled with cars, dressed-up people going in and out, laughing and chattering in the glow of the big new sign on the roof. So she figured Carl would be along today. Now a rattling at the side door got her attention, and in a minute the door opened and a thin young Asian man in kitchen whites stood there, blinking in the sunlight. He seemed surprised to see her.

She got off the chair and hurried to him. "Please tell Mr. Wynant Molly Byrne wants to see him."

The man jerked his head. "He inside. You come in?"

"No. You tell him. I'll wait out here."

The man blinked at her, shrugged, turned, and was gone.

She went back to sit at the table again. Then Carl came out. He'd changed. His hair had been shoulder-long at school. Now it was cut

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short as a banker's. He wore a gold-embroidered red cowboy shirt, narrow-legged beige whipcords, tooled cowboy boots dyed maroon and purple. All this seemed cheerful, but he didn't look cheerful. He looked angry. He closed the door behind him and came to her, scowling. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Why did you come back? You hated Poinsettia."

"Until I saw other places. Molly, what do you want?"

"To remind you that half of this should be mine." She had rehearsed just what she was going to say. It surprised her that she got it out. She was terribly frightened. "You said that money from Mr. Dowd would be ours together, Carl. That's what you said."

"I don't go partners with murderers," he said.

"I can tell the sheriff where your money came from," she said. "He's always watching me. He thinks I know who robbed Mr. Dowd."

Carl straightened sharply. He stepped to the latticework and peered toward the highway. In a minute, he turned back. "You're crazy, Molly. It's been years."

"He's still waiting for me to tell him," she said. "And I can, can't I? He asked if I had a boy friend. I said no, but I can still tell him the truth. And he can check it out, too, with who was in school with us then. It wasn't the big secret you thought it was. They knew we went to Copenhagen. The sheriff will believe me when I say you were with me at Mr. Dowd's. And if it was you that ran off with the money, why wasn't it you that did the shooting?"

"It wasn't my gun. It was your old man's gun," Carl said. "Only fingerprints on it are yours, Molly. It was cold—I wore gloves that night, remember? I hung onto the gun—it's all wrapped up and put away safe. So I've got proof. All you've got is a story, your word against mine."

"You ran away that night," she flared. "That's proof."

"My mother never reported the truck missing," Carl said. "So nobody knows when I left. Forget it, Molly. Get out of here and leave me alone. If you come pestering me, it will be me that tells the sheriff. You worked for old man Dowd, not me. You knew about the money. You were the one had your eye on it. You were the one killed him to get it."

"I want my half," she repeated stubbornly. "You wouldn't dare tell. You'd lose all of this."

"This wasn't bought with old man Dowd's money, for Christ's sake," he said. "I couldn't have bought a used car with what was in that fishing-tackle box."

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Molly frowned. "Then where—?"

"I used it to gamble with," he said. "In Las Vegas. Faro, poker, blackjack, dice. I was stupid and I lost damn near every penny. I was worse off than here—had to sleep in the truck, live on potato chips. Finally I figured even the egg ranch was better than starving. So I headed for home."

"You didn't get home. Carl, it's been years."

"I had twenty bucks in my shoe, and I stopped at Santa Anita. I hit a Pick Nine. You know what that is? You manage to pick the winners in all the races and they practically give you the damn racetrack. For a sixteen-dollar bet."

"But where have you been?"

"Found a partner, a lawyer. He had the brains, I had the money. I bought a broken-down tavern in Azusa, fixed it up, got it going again. Sold it for twice what I put into it and did the same with another in Pasadena. Then I was ready to come home like any man wants to come home." He turned and pointed at a big glossy car. "Mercedes. Forty thousand dollars, Molly." He glanced around again to be sure they were alone. "Not Mr. Dowd's money, not your money. Mine. Now clear out of here." He yanked her up off the chair, turned her, and pushed her back. "Back way, through the hills, so nobody sees you."

She stumbled, and had to clutch the latticework to keep from falling. She glared at him. "You'll be sorry."

"You can't tell the sheriff about me," he said.

"I can kill you, Carl." She was amazed at the sound of the words in her own ears. "Just like I killed Mr. Dowd. I can and I will. You got your money and your freedom, now I want mine. I want my half," she repeated again. "You promised. Don't make me wait."

"Get lost," he said, strode back into the building, and slammed the door.

Her father died. She found him slumped in the chair with the television going, whiskey bottle and glass on the carpet beside the chair, where so many others had left rings she'd never managed to scrub out. There was a wide stain where he'd spilled the glass this time. She worried more about how she was going to clean it up than about losing him. He'd been a torment and a burden to her for years. She wouldn't miss him. She was glad to watch him buried in the cemetery plot under the live oak beside her mother.

Then she learned she had to move. The house wasn't hers. Her

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father had, unknown to her, transferred ownership to his brother in Montana when he couldn't make the mortgage payments, and the brother had allowed him to live on here till he died. But the brother was dead, too, and the bank in Missoula that held the house under the agreement now were free to sell it, and that was what they did. Which was how Molly ended up in these little rooms.

All the same, her father's death eased things for her. There was only one mouth to feed, and no whiskey to buy. She quit waitressing at Snyder's. After cleaning up the units at the Gobineaus, she could come home, lie on her bed, watch TV—and think about killing Carl.

She is still thinking about it when knuckles rattle the screen door. A shadow lies on the screen. A man's shadow. The sheriff? In a panic, she crumples up the paper she's written on and jams it into the overflowing wastebasket under the sink. The blank paper and pencil she hides in a drawer. She forgets all about the gun. She's in a daze. She goes to the door, stands, hand on the latch, breathless. "Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's me, Molly," the shadow says, "Hugh Henderson."

She can't believe it. "I'm—sorry your mother died," she stammers. "I'll come—to the funeral—if you want."

"It's not about that," Hugh says. "Can I come in?"

"I'm sorry." Flustered, Molly pushes the door open. Hugh surprises her. Except for those soft brown eyes of his, he's changed from the runty boy he was in school. He's almost six feet tall, broad-shouldered, nothing frail about him. He looks handsome in a suit and shirt and tie and polished shoes. "Come in," she says.

"Thank you." He glances around at the small place. "Are you all right, Molly? Mom wrote me your father died."

She goes to the fridge. "Hot day. You want a Coke?"

"Yes, thanks. Shall I sit here?"

"Help yourself." She closes the refrigerator, sets a can in front of him, sits down, and pops the top of her can. "I've got a job at the Sleep EZ motel. I get along."

"My mom wrote me about that." He opens his own Coke. "It's why I checked in there last night. I thought I'd see you. I wanted to talk to you."

Molly's heart begins to hurry. "To me? What about?"

He shrugs, smiles, opens his hands. "My mom kept me up to date with everything going on in Poinsettia. She never got it through her head I hated the place, just wanted to forget it." He laughs bleakly,

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shakes his head. "And now she's dead. And I'm going to miss those letters." He looks at her with tears in his eyes. "Crazy, isn't it?"

Molly smiles bitterly. "I even miss my father—and you know what he was."

Hugh nods sympathetically, but his mind is back on his reason for coming here. "Mom wrote me when somebody robbed and shot Mr. Dowd. She said the sheriff questioned you about it."

"Only 'cause I worked for him," Molly says. She shrugs. "It was a long time ago."

"Same time Carl Wynant left town," Hugh says. "His mom told my mom about it—she was hurt enough Carl left, but what really burned her was he took the truck." Hugh drinks some of his Coke, holds the can for her to see, says, "Thank you." He sets the can down and frowns. "What do you think? I think it was Carl that robbed Mr. Dowd. He was always telling me the old man hid money in his house." Hugh glances at her wryly, and away again. "Back when we were friends. Carl wanted to escape from Poinsettia, that egg ranch. To live like people—that's how he put it. What good was the money to Mr. Dowd, anyway, sick as he was—dying?"

"Carl's back," she says. "He owns the roadhouse now."

"I know." Hugh draws a breath. His gentle brown eyes find Molly's, and hold them, grave, insistent. "After he did what he did to me—Mom wrote she'd see you and Carl together driving past in the truck, on your way out of town. But not toward Wynant's ranch. On the way to Copenhagen, right?"

"How do you know about Copenhagen?"

Poker-faced, Hugh says, "He used to take me there, too."

Molly opens her mouth, but she can't find words.

Hugh says, "Mom figured you two were sweethearts."

Molly blushes. "You know how this town gossips."

"Come on, Molly. He told you about the money at Dowd's, too, didn't he? That was a plan he had. To have sex with you, make you think he loved you so you'd let him in with your key and show him where the money was hidden."

Molly jumps up. "You're lying. Get out of here."

But he only sits looking at her quietly with those gentle eyes. She struggles to get her breath, to stop trembling, to find her voice. She shuts her eyes and nods in defeat. "He did that. That's just what he did." She sits down again. "He said he loved me and after we got Mr. Dowd's money we'd go away together."

"A real sweetheart," Hugh says. "He always was."

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"I wish he was dead."

"That what the rifle's for?" Hugh reaches for it from his chair, lays it on the table. "Is it ready to shoot?"

"My father taught me how to clean it, oil it, load it," Molly says. "Yes. It's ready to shoot."

Hugh stands and closes the door. "Let's talk," he says.

It's a good night. A full moon shines on the smooth round dry-grass hills outside town. Hugh has a beautiful new car. It smells of newness. It purrs almost soundlessly along the highway, and when Hugh swings it onto the two-lane country road that leads to Copenhagen it scarcely notices the ruts and potholes in the neglected tarmac. Molly sits with the rifle between her knees. Her hand keeps stroking the velvety upholstery of the seat. She is so happy to be riding in this lovely car, she forgets for long minutes at a time where they are bound for and why.

In the dim glow of the elaborate instrument panel, Hugh's face is set grimly. When she glances at him, it reminds her, and she takes her hands from the softness of the upholstery and puts them on the cold wood and steel of the gun. This is the night she has been waiting for all these years. She looks out at the moonlit hills, the shadows of the scattered oaks on the hills, stars above, a faroff ranch-house, lights aglow. It's beautiful. Her heart swells at the beauty of it. She turns suddenly to Hugh. And he is beautiful, too. She wants to lean across and kiss him.

He glances at her. "You all right?"

She catches hold of herself, nods stiffly. "Fine."

He reads his watch. "I hope he's not early." He switches off the headlights and slows the car to a crawl. She can see why. There, to the far left, the great deserted barn that is Copenhagen looms up, the moon silvering its roof. Hugh glances into the rearview mirror. There is a mirror on Molly's door. She looks into it. The road lies dark behind them. Hugh spins the steering wheel and gingerly eases the car, bumping, between the crooked fenceposts that long ago shed their gate and up the two-rut road toward the barn. It is so still she can hear the tall weeds brush the underside of the car.

"Get the gun ready," Hugh whispers.

She lifts the rifle. The space is too cramped. She hears a soft whine, and the window beside her opens. She jacks a bullet into the chamber, pokes the barrel out the window, and works an arm out to balance it, her head out into the cool night to lay a cheekbone against

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the stock. The hard-pan of the yard is rough and this jiggles the gun. But there's nothing to fire at. The yard is empty.

Hugh stops the car in the middle of the yard and switches off the engine. There is enough moonlight so when she looks at him she can see his white teeth bared in a smile. "We got here first," he says.

Molly draws in the gun, opens the door, gets out into the silence, the gun hanging in her hand. It's not like the other times she came here, is it? She felt wonderful those times. Well, she feels wonderful tonight, doesn't she? It's just a different kind of wonderful, that's all. The other was foolish. This is real. She reaches into the car and Hugh puts a flashlight into her hand.

"Good hunting," he says.

"Don't worry," she says, switches on the flashlight, and walks into the barn. It hasn't changed much. Bums have used it, so there are cans and bottles and paper trash strewn around, but she just kicks these aside in her walk to the ladder.

The loft is the same. She stands at the top of the ladder in the deep straw for a minute, wanting to go to the corner where Carl spread out the sleeping bag and they made love. A lump forms in her throat. Her eyes grow misty.

But she turns away. Over there gapes the big door used to pulley bales from trucks below up into the loft. The door looks down on the barnyard. She goes there, making the old planks creak, lays the rifle on the straw, and stretches out beside it. She turns off the flashlight and looks down on Hugh's car with the moonlight shining on it. She smiles to herself. It all seems so simple now. But she could never have done it alone. Molly Byrne could never have lured Carl out here. It took Hugh Henderson's "How are you, old buddy?" on the telephone to do that. She watches the empty road.

She reads her watch. It is still not nine o'clock. Time is standing still. What if he doesn't come? What if he sensed Hugh was lying when Hugh told him he had brought home with him naked, grinning photographs of the teenage Carl doing obscene stuff for Hugh's camera in his bedroom out at the egg ranch and Hugh wanted ten thousand dollars or he'd show them to the Poinsettia newspaper? Hugh told Molly it wasn't true. The pictures once existed, all right, but the day he left Poinsettia he angrily burned every picture he'd ever taken of Carl, and all the negatives. He was smooth and menacing on the phone, but is Carl really so stupid as to come alone to this godforsaken place to meet a man who hates him as Hugh Hen-

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derson does? Along the road, the shadows of the trees shift as the moon climbs higher in the sky.

Her watch says it is now ten past nine. Hugh has gotten out of the car and stands leaning against it, arms crossed, gazing toward the road.

"He's not coming!" Molly calls.

"Be quiet," he says, without looking up.

And soon, light flickers beyond the farthest hills. Moving light. The lights of a car. She keeps her gaze on them. They vanish and reappear, each time closer. Then the car is within sight. It comes on, following the beams of its headlights.

It swings in at the entrance to Copenhagen. It is the sleek Mercedes. Its headlights jitter a little over the uneven ground of the yard. Molly turns, picks up the rifle, fits it against her shoulder as her father taught her, and squints, sighting along the moonlight-glinting barrel. The car rocks to a halt and the sound of its engine dies in the night silence.

Hugh takes a step toward it. The headlights of the Mercedes shut off and the door opens. Carl, dressed in white, climbs out. Hugh walks toward him. He reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out an envelope. It's nothing but a piece of junk mail from Molly's wastebasket under the sink, coupons for laundry detergent, not photographs. He holds it out to Carl. And this is the moment, the split second she has been waiting for all these years. Her finger tightens on the trigger.

A plank creaks. The floor of the loft shakes under her. A voice behind her says, "Don't shoot, Molly." The rifle barrel wavers. The rifle fires. Below, in the moonlight, Hugh Henderson yelps, throws up his arms, spins drunkenly, and falls. That's all she sees.

Rough hands jerk her to her feet, fling the rifle aside. It's the sheriff. He must have been here all along, hiding in the shadows. Carl must have sent him. "Didn't you hear me?" He gives her an angry shake. "I told you not to shoot!"

"You spoiled my aim," she cries, "you spoiled my aim!"

"Q"

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CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

EQ JUNE/89

ELLERY QUEEN—published 13 times a year. CLASSIFIED AD rate is $3.20 per word—payable in advance—($48.00 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

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Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
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INDEX TO VOLUME NINETY-THREE—JANUARY–JUNE 1989

ADCOCK, THOMAS: Shoot Me, I'm Already Dead	January	124
ALLYN, DOUG: Debt of Honor	January	42
The Last Reunion	June	4
ARDAI, CHARLES: Takeout Order	April	82
ASIMOV, ISAAC: The Envelope	April	89
The Last Man	March	92
ATODA, TAKASHI: Napoleon Crazy	March	98
BANKIER, WILLIAM: The Baytown Follies	April	106
Cross Words	January	56
The Hitman's Daughter	March	82
Norris Farmer's Secret	May	53
BARNARD, ROBERT: The Face of Violence	February	32
Not Much of a Life	March	54
Post Mortem	May	101
BAXT, GEORGE: The Burying of Treasure	June	47
Go to the Devil	March	118
The Man Who Slew Too Much	January	93
BLOCK, LAWRENCE: Cleveland in My Dreams	February	21
BOEHM, PEGGY: It Only Hurts for a Minute	March	126
BOLAND, JOHN C.: The Substitute	February	99
BOND, RALEIGH: The Barclay Boys	February	110
BOSWORTH, JANE: Tarrin' Turkeys	January	72
BRAND, CHRISTIANNA: The Rocking Chair	May	4
BRAUN, LILIAN JACKSON: Weekend of the Big Puddle	May	118
BREEN, JON L.: The Jury Box	January–June	
BURTON, ANDREW J.: A Happy Estate	May	52
CAIL, CAROL: Out of Her Misery	April	132
CASH-DOMINGO, LEA: The Man of the House	April	36
CASTLE, JAMES: Condition of Sale	April	33
DALE, MONICA: Hemmed-In	January	88
DAVENPORT, B. J.: Love Thine Enemy	March	41
DE LA TORRE, LILLIAN: The Earl's Nightingale	May	66
EQMM READERS AWARD (1988)	May	80
FRASER, ANTONIA: The Blude-Red Wine	June	113
FREITAS, J. V.: Duffle Bag	June	106
GELLER, JUDY: To Victor Go the Spoils	April	118
GILBERT, MICHAEL: The Jackal and the Tiger	February	133
GODFREY, PETER: The Stairs of Sand	January	138
GORES, JOE: File #12: Do Not Go Gentle	March	133
HAMILTON, NAN: Too Many Pebbles	January	102
HANSEN, JOSEPH: Molly's Aim	June	126

(Continued on page 157)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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INDEX TO VOLUME NINETY-THREE—JANUARY–JUNE 1989

(Continued from page 156)

HAWN, ELIZABETH L.: Escape Routes	February	98
Overachiever	April	32
HILL , REGINALD: Urban Legend	March	127
HIMES, CHESTER: Headwaiter	June	60
HOCH, EDWARD D.: The Gypsy and the Pilgrims	June	80
The Killer Everyone Knew	March	62
The Problem of the Two Birthmarks	May	85
Sacajawea's Gold	January	4
The Theft of the Doctor's Chopsticks	February	3
The Underground Spy	April	43
HOLDING, JAMES: Another Grave Tone	January	41
Another Grave Tone	March	97
Another Grave Tone	April	81
KEATING, H. R. F.: Light Coming	March	114
KLACAR, PAMELA: Where's His Beef?	March	132
KOEHLER, GEORGE: Stuck Up	February	123
KOEHLER, WILLIAM: Indian Taker	February	132
KUNIS, RENA GARTER: Happy Ending	January	101
LARGE, JOHN: Passing Remark	June	46
LASKOWITZ, PEARL LIEBMAN: Not Even Death Did Them Part	May	18
LEVITSKY, RONALD: A Sabbath Flame	February	124
LOPATIN, JUDY: The Here and Now	February	83
LOVECCHIO, RICK: A Slice of Life	January	137
LUCAS, ARETA: To Each His/Her Own	June	30
MASUR, HAROLD Q.: The Opinion	May	28
MCNEIL, MARIANNE MCFARLAND: Hesitant Invitation	June	112
MONFREDO, MIRIAM GRACE: The Vigil Table	February	52
MOYES, PATRICIA: The Extra Mile	March	42
MULLINS, TERRY: Late Developments	April	22
Racial Incident	May	20
Routine Assignment	February	74
NELSON, STEVE: Another Day at Home	May	46
PENTECOST, HUGH: An Easy Murder	May	112
PIRO, D.: Royal Flush	April	139
POLLACK, DOROTHY BELLE: Better, By Far, Than a Potion	April	57
POWELL, JAMES: Burning Bridges	February	38
The Greenhouse Dogs	June	94
A New Leaf	January	32
The Snood of Night	March	29
RENDELL, RUTH: The Copper Peacock	June	32
A Pair of Yellow Lilies	April	4
Weeds	March	22

(Continued on page 158)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INDEX TO VOLUME NINETY-THREE—JANUARY–JUNE 1989

(Continued from page 157)

ROUECHÉ BERTON: The Key	January	27
The Lug Wrench	January	20
SALLIS, JAMES: The Curious Incident	February	108
I Saw Robert Johnson	June	56
SCHOFIELD, DOROTHY HUNT: One Day in August	April	102
SCOTT, JEFFRY: Putting It Right	April	140
SLADE, ROSEMARY: Cherchez le Chat	April	15
SLESAR, HENRY: Possession	April	68
SMITH, WILLIAM F.: In-Sight Job	May	111
SUTER, JOHN F.: Not Alone in Her Grave	January	114
The Old Pine Tree Is No More	April	119
TURNBULL, PETER: The Man with the Jesus Look	March	4
Story from a Dark Street	February	56
TWOHY, ROBERT: Sloat's Last Case	May	127
VACHSS, ANDREW: Placebo	March	50
WARD, BILL, B.S.I.: The Devil Doctor	June	158
WHITEHEAD, J. W.: The Usual	April	16
WITKOP, FLORENCE: Spy's Eyes	April	58

"Q"

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*Baker Street Irregular

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. Vol. 93, No. 6, Whole No. 557, June 1989. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at $2.00 a copy. Annual subscription $25.97 in U.S.A. and possessions; $29.50 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 7052, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third-class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario.

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POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 7052, Red Oak, IA 51591. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3E1. ISSN: 0013-6328. For back issues, send $3.50 to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462.

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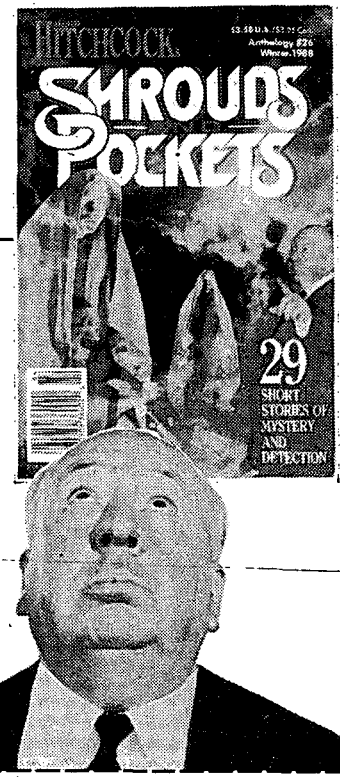

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